



# First coronavirus death in Kuwait amid 62 new cases

## WHO's word awaited on another expat's death • Virus may spread through breathing

### Kuwait exports oil from joint fields after 5-year halt

KUWAIT: Kuwait announced Friday it will export its first crude shipment from oilfields in a shared neutral zone with Saudi Arabia that had been shut for five years due to a dispute. Oil Minister Khaled Al-Fadhel said that around one million barrels will be loaded yesterday and today onboard a giant Kuwaiti tanker 'Dar Salwa', "whose final destination will be the Asian markets", according to the official Kuwait News Agency (KUNA).

"The export of this shipment, produced from the shared Wafra field, is in line with the orientation of the state of Kuwait to increase crude production after the expiry of the OPEC+ agreement on March 31," Fadhel added, referring to a previous agreement between oil exporters to curb global oil supply. KUNA also reported Kuwait will ramp up oil output in April until it reaches about 3.15 million barrels per day, citing the chief executive of Kuwait Petroleum Corp. The increase in output will come from the neutral zone.

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- Cut! Coronavirus pegs back Ramadan soaps (Page 15)
- Zoom rockets to fame, with some hiccups (Page 6)

KUWAIT: The ministry of health announced yesterday the first death case from the novel coronavirus, while 62 fresh cases were reported in the last 24 hours. This brings the country's tally of confirmed virus cases up to 479, the ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad told KUNA. The ministry announced the deceased was a 46-year-old Indian man who was in the intensive care unit and had been receiving treatment for several days. Earlier in the day, Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced the recovery of 11 people from the novel coronavirus, raising the country's total recoveries to 93.

Director of Al-Amiri Hospital Dr Ali Alalanda said on Friday that the post-mortem examination of an Indian who died on Thursday revealed that he had been infected with COVID-19. However, linking his death to the coronavirus infection will be determined by the World Health Organization, Alalanda said in a statement to KUNA. The 60-year-old resi-

dent, whose body was brought to the hospital, had died due to a cardiac arrest, but a medical examination and swab test conducted in line with a recommendation by WHO showed that he was infected with the coronavirus, Dr Alalanda said.

The deceased neither had symptoms of the contagious disease nor visited any hospital recently, he said. Immediately after registering this case, concerned personnel scrambled to take measures and examine persons who had been in contact with the deceased. They also completed the quarantine of the building where he lived, the hospital director added. This building had been quarantined due to discovering suspected coronavirus cases there. Dr Alalanda affirmed the ministry of health's transparency policy, reiterating that the public will be informed about any fresh development concerning the pandemic.

China paid homage yesterday to victims of the coronavirus in the place

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- Google user location data to help govts tackle virus (Page 9)

Sat. 04/04/2020

### Updates on COVID 19

Total cases	New cases	Active cases	Recovered	ICU	Deaths
479	62	385	93	17	1

Cases in contact: 37

33 cases of Indian residents in contact with confirmed case under investigation. 4 cases of Egyptian residents in contact with confirmed case under investigation.

Under investigation: 25

17 cases of Indian residents, 4 cases of Bangladeshi residents, 2 cases of Egyptian residents, one case of Iranian resident.

KUWAIT, MOH  
www.moh.gov.kw

وزارة الصحة  
Ministry of Health

مكتب الإعلام الصحي  
Health Media Office

# V O L V O

# STAY SAFE STAY HOME



# Kuwait vegetable market sells to co-ops only to prevent crowding

## Defense Ministry hands over quarantine zone in Mishref

Pandemic Diaries

### The eye of the storm



By Jamie Etheridge

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It has now been nearly two weeks since Kuwait imposed a partial curfew. When this all began in late February, I don't think most of us had any clue how bad or how far-reaching it might get. Across the globe, we now have more than one million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and likely hundreds of thousands of more asymptomatic and unconfirmed cases.

In the eye of the storm, it may seem calm and quiet - the silence of the streets of Kuwait after the 5 pm curfew starts. But the calm belies the nightmare we are all living and worse, the nightmare scenarios likely yet to come. In Kuwait, the government has handled the situation remarkably well and we have had only one death so far (still unconfirmed as of 8 am yesterday) among a total of 417 confirmed cases as of Friday.

But we also now clearly have community transmission, and as a result, we are likely to see the numbers of infected grow exponentially. Community transmission or spread happens when people become infected with the virus but do not know how they got it. In Kuwait, that means they did not travel abroad recently but have been in contact - unknowingly - with someone who is infected (someone who may even possibly be asymptomatic). Community transmission is one of the key factors fueling a surge in cases and this is why the government in Kuwait has repeatedly told people to #stayathome and help #flattenthecurve. Our curve is not flattening, and as a result, we are most likely now going to see a major surge in cases and the situation worsen terribly.

The reality that we now face is difficult to digest. Some days I wake up and after reading the news or hearing the latest numbers, feel utterly powerless, filled with frustration and rage and anxiety. To combat the diet of grim facts and data of the daily numbers, I've taken to writing a few short lines each morning, noting something that I feel grateful for or spending a few minutes drawing or sketching something that brings me joy. These small acts of self-care won't stop the spread of the coronavirus and won't slow this pandemic, but they help keep me sane and centered even in the midst of this global chaos.

What at first seemed a blip, a momentary disturbance in our daily way of life, has overtaken the entire globe - our economies, our societies, our communities. It has brought out the best in us - see the numbers of Kuwaiti youth volunteers helping out across the country - and the worst (no need to mention the mass layoffs, people not paid their salaries, onion hoarding and calls to expel all expats).

The net result of this pandemic will reach far into the future and it will likely reshape much of what we believe to be true about the world. Those who survive will look back at this period as a pivotal moment in human history, an apex or a nadir from which we will move forward. By some accounts it took the Europeans nearly 200 years to recover from bubonic plague. This is hardly a comfort to those of us living through the pandemic. But with every act we commit now, we lay a brick in the foundation of our children's future.

Editor's Note: The author has decided to change the name of this column from 'Curfew Diaries' to 'Pandemic Diaries', as the column discusses the local and the broader implications of the pandemic, the curfew in Kuwait being only one small component of it.



KUWAIT: This photo provided by the Ministry of Defense shows partitions inside Hall V in the Kuwait International Fairground in Mishref, which was turned into a quarantine zone.

KUWAIT: Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) yesterday decided to allocate the Furdha vegetable market to provide and sell their products to cooperative societies and supermarkets only, in order to avoid gatherings. In a statement, the ministry said that according to the instructions by the Cabinet and health authorities, namely ministerial Resolution No. 87 of 2020 was issued, which stipulates in its second article that the priority of selling should be in order: co-operative societies, markets, restaurants, hotels, and outlets selling agricultural products. It noted that the ministerial decision came on the instructions of the Ministry of Health that the market should be closed to limit crowding and prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The third article indicated that the decision is effective from the date of its issuance until further notice, it added.

#### 53,000 sheep

Separately, Al-Mawashi livestock transport and trading company announced Friday arrival of 53,000 sheep which were brought from South Africa on board its vessel 'Al-Messilah'. Al-Mawashi CEO Osama Boodai said in a press release local consumers have showed good appetite for the South African sheep which combine taste and value. He said there were two shipments from Australia due to arrive in April. Al-Shuwaikh vessel was already loaded on Monday and the ship was on its way to Kuwait, he added. Mawashi, said Boodai, would be bringing a total of 115,000 sheep this month which was in compliance with instructions of His Highness the Amir

## Kuwait working to mitigate COVID-19 impact on oil market

KUWAIT: Deputy Board Chairman of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) Hashem Hashem said workers in oil sector exert praiseworthy efforts around the clock to ensure supplies to market despite challenges posed by novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. In a statement to the press on Friday, Hashem, also KPC's CEO, took pride in the dedication of the oil workers to "the march of giving" and the achievement of the targets of the oil sector strategy 2040 amid the challenging circumstances. "Their relentless efforts bore fruit and helped the State of Kuwait increase its oil output recently, and start producing heavy crude oil from the northern fields, and tapping into the resources of Khafji oilfield in the Neutral Zone," he pointed out.

Kuwait's oil output surged to nearly 2.9 million barrels per day in March and is to continue increasing to 3.15 million bpd in April, Hashem expected based on the estimates of the rise in the joint production in the Neutral Zone and Al-Wafrah oilfields. "The oil workers

continue making tremendous efforts to ensure sustainable oil and gas supplies to the local and global markets, and marketing oil, by-products and petrochemicals amid dwindling demand caused by the coronavirus pandemic," he went on. Regarding KPC's corporate social responsibility, Hashem said the corporation made trailblazing contributions to the state's efforts to combat the spread of Covid-19. "Since the pandemic reached Kuwait in late February, KPC has set and equipped several sites as quarantines and put them at the disposal of the Ministry of Health," he noted. Hashem pledged that the corporation would continue backing the fight against the pandemic and carrying out the oil sector strategy 2040 as per the set timeline.

#### Quarantine zone

In separate news, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) completed and handed over Friday Hall V in the Kuwait International Fairground in Mishref to the Ministry of Health (MoH) to be used as quarantine. The MoD personnel have been working round-the-clock to prepare the quarantine to meet requirements put in place by the MoH which is leading the country's efforts to fighting coronavirus, MoD Acting Undersecretary Sheikh Fahad Jaber Al-Sabah said in a statement. He said the ministry succeeded in finishing the 259-room quarantine in Hall V in three days. Work is underway to prepare Hall VI to be used as quarantine as well.

#### Teachers' wages

Separately, the Ministry of Education said Thursday that private schools, closed as a preventive measure to prevent spread of coronavirus among students and teachers, should pay salaries of their workers, Ministry of Education said Thursday. The ministry said Law No. 6 of 2010 gave the ministry authority to take legal, financial and administrative measures if private schools failed to pay wages of their employees. The ministry's private education sector would take legal action against any school failing to pay wages of their employees, it said. —KUNA

In other news, the Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) announced the operation of three new clean fuel producing units at the Al-Ahmadi Refinery. The sulfur block unit No. 141 with a production capacity of 50,000 barrels a day and two sulfur extraction units No. 151 and 152 have entered the operation phase, Deputy CEO for Projects Department and KNPC Spokesman Abdullah Al-Ajmi said Thursday. He pointed out that the three units are crucially important parts of KNPC's ambitious clean fuel project. They are highly profitable and produce ultra-low sulfur products which comply with the state-of-the-art international environment protection standards, Ajmi said. —KUNA

IN MY VIEW

### Be patient and cooperate



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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It is natural for human beings to be apprehensive towards anything they are not familiar with or used to, even if it is to their benefit, and things become worse when it has to do with a natural phenomenon or a pandemic, which we are currently going through. We are lucky as advances have been made in the scientific domain and knowledge has expanded about discovering things and how to deal with them, and all we have to do is listen to advice and behave accordingly.

I went to a cooperative society three days ago and found things were much better than at the start of the pandemic. There were no crowds, and I was told the entrance was moved to the side where chairs were arranged with safe distances between them. A smiling young man approached me and asked me for my civil ID very politely and asked me to take a seat. I noticed another man was calling names, then when my name came up, I approached the entrance, where I was met with hand sanitizers, gloves and a sterilized cart with its handle covered with a plastic sheet, in addition to my body temperature being checked. This is an assuring act and it is as recommended by healthcare professionals in an attempt to avoid transmission of the virus among people, and it's a measure that must be adhered to.

Despite strict measures that are being taken, we are still witnessing the appearance of new cases. When we thought the numbers were gradually descending, Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad told us on Friday that the number of new cases discovered within the past 24 hours reached 75. Very alarming, isn't it?

So, we must be careful and not let down our guard for a second, as human nature calls upon us. Most of the new discoveries were among residents of buildings where large numbers of people dwelled, where one or two COVID-19 infected persons transferred it to hundreds of others.

We must exercise patience and must follow instructions more closely and to the letter, starting with the request to "stay home." Staying home is not an incarceration - it is for our safety. Staying home is an assurance; staying home is a management; staying home is healthy; staying home is the most potent remedy against our common invisible enemy.

I call upon authorities to seriously consider isolating areas as many countries have done, which had promising success, as the case was at the source of the virus. Government and people must be proactive and come up with measures that may cause inconvenience for many, but this inconvenience will be temporary and normal daily life will be restored. Cooperation and common sense bring results - good results at that.

"Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so we may fear less." — Marie Curie

## Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 417 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as of Friday. With the exception of 16 cases in intensive care, all cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while 911 have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 93 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, the ministry said. There are 324 people receiving treatment and 2,474 quarantined. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested thousands of people. Meanwhile, Kuwait requires all expatriates who arrived from travel on March 1 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center at Hall 6 to test people for possible infection.

#### Curfew

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

#### Operating businesses

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

- 1- Various types of foodstuff and supplies stores and markets.
- 2- Laundromats.
- 3- Various type of repair shops.
- 4- Automobile repair, maintenance and spare parts.
- 5- Money exchangers.
- 6- Pharmacies.
- 7- Various types of restaurants.
- 8- Optical shops.
- 9- Administrative offices.
- 10- Cooking gas branches.
- 11- Co-ops' family needs branches.
- 12- Feed shops.

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

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

#### Precautions

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

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

#### Hotlines

- The Ministry of Health has set the following hotlines to receive inquiries about the coronavirus 24/7: 24970967 - 96049698 - 99048619.
- The Education Ministry set the following hotlines to receive inquiries on school closures related to the anti-coronavirus measures:
  - 24970967 (24/7 hotline)
  - 51575591 (Capital Educational Zone)
  - 51576117 (Hawally Educational Zone)
  - 51576576 (Farwaniya Educational Zone)
  - 51577055 (Jahra Educational Zone)
  - 51577655 (Ahmadi Educational Zone)
  - 51577951 (Mubarak Al-Kabeer Educational Zone)
  - 51578171 (Religious Studies Department)
  - 51588599 (Private Education Department)
  - 51592515 (Services Department)
  - 51594544 (Public Relations Department)

#### Medicine delivery

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

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

Local

# Second phase of Kuwaitis' repatriation starts this week

## Kuwait talks COVID-19 countermeasures with US, India

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah announced Friday, the implementation of the second phase of the nationals' repatriation plan this week, stressing that Kuwait will not abandon any citizen anywhere in the world. Jarallah said in a statement to Kuwait TV that the repatriation plans are carefully set up and take into account the commitment to citizens' comfort in full and those plans are governed by the standards set by health authorities and their ability to handle nationals coming from abroad.

The ministry started working on citizens' return from the first day of the crisis by forming an emergency committee in the ministry that directed the diplomatic missions of the state to count the numbers of the citizens abroad, he added. He stated that the numbers of stranded and sick citizens were limited and the embassies were directed to activate the emergency phone numbers in addition to activating the ministry's emergency phone numbers, indicating that the number of Kuwaiti tourists abroad is about 23,000. Jarallah affirmed that the ministry urged the embassies abroad to provide housing and food for citizens, and to ensure their safety.

Furthermore, Jarallah said that the first phase included 2,710 citizens, with 15 trips from 11 countries, from 25 to 29 March. He added that the ministry is currently working on preparing the lists in preparation for the second phase, and it will be from the same countries from which citizens were evacuated in the first stage in addition to other countries, according to the conditions of citizens and to the required standards.

on regional and international developments amidst ongoing efforts to curb spread of the novel coronavirus. Jarallah and Romanowski also discussed the relations between the two countries, a foreign ministry statement said. The meeting was attended by Assistant Foreign Minister for Jarallah's Office Ayham Al-Omar.

**Expired residencies**  
On the ministry's role towards the expatriates with expired residencies in Kuwait, Jarallah said that the ministry was keen to meet with the heads of diplomatic missions of those countries to contact their nationals and urge them to leave the country, expressing thanks to the Ministry of Interior for facilities and privileges provided to violators.

Regarding the praise from the World Health Organization (WHO) to Kuwait, as one of WHO's largest donors, Jarallah said, "We are proud of this praise," stressing that Kuwait is in contact with the organization since the beginning of the crisis to inspect and support the needs of countries. He stated that the directives of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah were to dedicate Kuwait's humanitarian role in this crisis and to continue communication with WHO and providing very generous support to it in order to assist the needy countries.

**COVID-19 countermeasures**  
In other news, Jarallah held talks Friday with US Ambassador in Kuwait Alina Romanowski

Separately, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah on Friday phoned his Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, discussing overall historic and close relations bonding the two friendly countries in various sectors. The phone talks also covered means of boosting cooperation for coping with spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic throughout the globe.

In the meantime, Kuwait's Embassy in London urged citizens in Britain whose visas were about to expire and were unable to return back to Kuwait to contact the immigration department to correct their status. The Embassy, in a statement, said Kuwaiti tourists or patients whose visas were about to expire should personally contact the immigration office at: (0044) 800-678-1767 or Email: CIH@home-office.gov.uk. It added the immigration office working hours are Monday to Friday from 9:00 am until 5:00 pm. — KUNA



Khaled Al-Jarallah

## Kuwait largest contributor to WHO's coronavirus programs

**GENEVA:** World Health Organization's Director General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Friday Kuwait was the largest contributor to WHO's coronavirus combat operations. Kuwait contributed \$60 million to WHO's respond programs against coronavirus which claimed lives of over 50,000 and affected some a million others, Ghebreyesus told a press briefing. He said restrictions imposed by governments worldwide to prevent spread of coronavirus have economic and social ramifications, but they also curb the spread and left a great impact on peoples. WHO is supporting calls by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to protect communities with low income, said Ghebreyesus, and saving lives of people through application of preventive measures should be



coupled with provision of food and basic needs. He said governments should comply with WHO's coronavirus guidelines with regards to testing, quarantining and follow up of cases. Lifting curfew at an early time, he warned, would jeopardize communities because they could face a second wave thus an increase in infections. Ghebreyesus called on countries to boost health systems and alleviate financial difficulties of citizens. — KUNA

**Around 23,000 Kuwaiti tourists abroad**



**KUWAIT:** Minister of Commerce and Industry Khaled Al-Roudhan attends an extraordinary meeting via videoconference with his GCC counterparts. — KUNA

## Kuwait proposes GCC food security net to secure supplies

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait has proposed the creation of a regional food security net for the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members states to ensure adequate and accessible food supplies as well as to meet basic food shortages in crisis times. The Kuwaiti proposal was raised by Minister of Commerce and Industry Khaled Al-Roudhan during the extraordinary meeting of the GCC commerce and industry ministers which was held Thursday via videoconference. In a press statement following the meeting, Kuwait's Ministry of Commerce and Industry said the GCC ministers are working on paper for a unified vision about GCC food security to be studied and adopted soon. It further noted that Kuwait has also called for special arrangements at border control and customs posts to ensure the

smooth movement of basic food and medicine supplies among GCC countries. Moreover, the ministry pointed out that the GCC ministers have also discussed the expected economic ramifications of the novel coronavirus pandemic and the recommendations put forward by the undersecretaries of the commerce ministries across the region in this regard. The ministry emphasized that Kuwait will continue coordination of efforts and exchange of information with other GCC states at this delicate time to help secure food need. It indicated that the meeting was held upon an invitation from the General Secretariat of the Council of GCC Ministers of Commerce in coordination with the Ministry of Economy in the United Arab Emirates which hold the council's rotating presidency. — KUNA

## Health ministry withdraws 'Raniditine' products from market

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MoH) said Thursday it was withdrawing all products containing Raniditine substance from the market, upon recommendations of the US Food and Drug Administration, because they contain large concentrations of residues of N-Nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA). The MoH's drug and herbal registration and supervision decided to withdraw the products for the sake of wellbeing of the public, said Dr Abdullah Al-Bader, Assistant Undersecretary for pharmaceutical super-

vision. This measure, he added, was upon recommendation of FDA following tests showing large concentration of N-Nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA) residues which could be harmful to patients if the medicine is exposed to overheating. Bader said his department had stopped in September 2019 registration of all medications containing Raniditine, used to decrease stomach acid production, until further examinations of suitable N-Nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA) levels. — KUNA



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Local

# First batch of expatriates availing amnesty leave Kuwait



**KUWAIT:** Filipinos who availed general amnesty granted by the Kuwaiti government are pictured gathering at the Kuwait International Airport Terminal 4, on April 3, 2020 on their way home to Manila amid the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic crisis. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Ministry of Interior (MoI) said a first plane carrying 300 Filipinos, whose residency permits expired and were allowed to leave the country without payment of fines, had left for Manila earlier on Friday. The flight was part of a process to encourage expatriates with expired residencies to leave the country without payment of fines, said the MoI in a statement. It added expatriates were placed in housing facilities and offered meals until their departure, with possibility of them to return back to work in Kuwait by obtaining new residency permits. The MoI has specified dates for every nationality with invalid residency permit to come forward and apply for a return journey. The Filipino community can apply on April 1-5, Egyptians on April 6-10, Indians on April 11-15, Bangladeshis on April 16-20, Sri Lankans on April 21-25 and other nationalities on April 26-30. Expatriates wishing to correct their residency status should pay the fines, the ministry underlined. — KUNA



**A Filipina woman wearing a mask waits with fellow compatriots who availed general amnesty granted by the Kuwaiti government, at the Kuwait International Airport Terminal 4.**



**A police officer walks by Filipinos who availed general amnesty, at the Kuwait International Airport Terminal 4.**



**Filipinos who availed general amnesty granted by the Kuwaiti government are escorted by a policewoman as they arrive at the Kuwait International Airport Terminal 4.**



**Cleaners wearing facemasks rest at the Kuwait International Airport Terminal 4.**



**A Kuwaiti police man wearing a mask stands by the flight's takeoff board at the Kuwait International Airport Terminal 4.**



## 8 LEADING TIPS TO REDUCE THE RISK OF CORONAVIRUS INFECTION



PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT BROUGHT TO YOU BY MWA & FHI

The Novel Coronavirus is a new strain originating from Wuhan City (China). We at the Medical Wellness Association (MWA) and the Family Hygiene Institute (FHI) regard any global outbreak as something we must conquer through educating our communities on how to protect themselves via effective preventive measures.

### WASH AND DRY YOUR HANDS REGULARLY

To ensure real efficacy, make sure to wash your hands with proven anti-bacterial soap and then dry them with a fresh paper towel or tissue. Damp and used cloth towels are a breeding ground for germs.



### AVOID TOUCHING YOUR EYES, NOSE OR MOUTH WHEN IN PUBLIC PLACES

Your eyes, nose and mouth are entry points for germs and viruses into your bodies. While a thorough handwashing should neutralize the threat of infection, you should still avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with your hands, especially when in a public place.

### USE A STERILIZED TISSUE TO COVER YOUR MOUTH & NOSE WHEN SNEEZING OR COUGHING

Make sure to cover your nose and mouth with a tissue, when coughing or sneezing. BUT: Ordinary tissues are often manufactured under unsanitary conditions; and can be laden with germs and viruses. Given tissue products touch your eyes, nose, mouth and other intimate parts of your body, it is important to choose your tissues wisely! Endeavor to use ONLY sterilized tissue products. The word "Sterilized" should appear prominently on the tissue package. For further information on sterilized tissues, please visit the MWA Website (link below).



### WEAR A DISINFECTANT FACE MASK

Probably the single most important tool in the fight against infection is the surgical face mask, but most ordinary masks only filter dust and might prove ineffective. Instead, look for disinfectant or self-sterilizing face masks that are specifically designed for infection prevention. Avoid touching the mask with your hands while it's on your face and remember to wash your hands after removing the mask from your face.



### CHOOSE YOUR HOME AND PERSONAL CARE PRODUCTS WISELY

When buying products for personal or home care, make sure to choose reputable products that put emphasis on anti-bacterial properties that are sterilized and promote health & hygiene as their key benefit. Disinfection is the best prevention of infection.

### PRACTICE GOOD FOOD SAFETY WHEN PREPARING AND COOKING RAW MEAT

Use different chopping boards and knives for raw meats and cooked foods, wash your hands between handling raw food and cooked food, ensure meat is not undercooked prior to consumption, once cooked, place your prepared food on sterilized paper towels to reduce the risk of surface borne infections.



### AVOID SHARING EATING UTENSILS

While common in some cultures, the sharing of eating utensils, such as cups and cutlery can lead to the spread of germs and viruses. Therefore, it is recommended to avoid sharing these utensils with other people.

### ACTIVELY STRENGTHEN YOUR IMMUNITY TO FIGHT OFF PATHOGENS

While all the above preventive tips are robust and effective, there is no 100% guarantee that you or your loved ones may not be infected. There is no substitute for having a strong and healthy immune system, which can be achieved by: (a) proper nutrition rich in vitamins and minerals, (b) reducing smoking, (c) reducing alcohol consumption, (d) regular exercise and (e) adequate sleep.



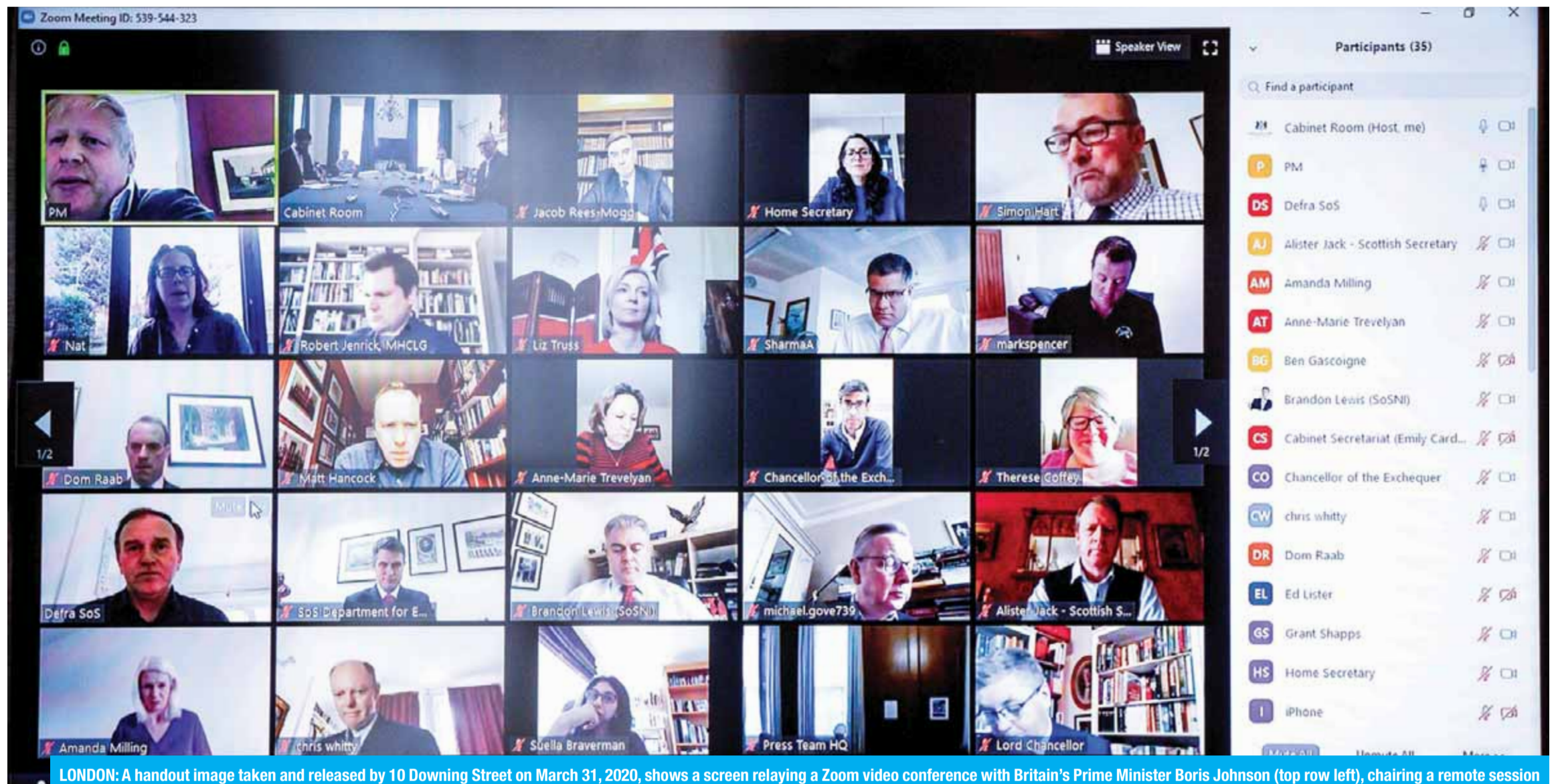


US, UK Spain deaths mount; Deadly virus threatens war zones

## French scientists' remarks spark a storm of criticism

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LONDON: A handout image taken and released by 10 Downing Street on March 31, 2020, shows a screen relaying a Zoom video conference with Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (top row left), chairing a remote session with minister of his Cabinet, whilst still self-isolating from within 11 Downing Street. — AFP

# Video app Zoom rockets to fame

## Couples get married in 'zoomed' ceremonies

**SAN FRANCISCO:** What does British Prime Minister Boris Johnson have in common with virtual happy hour celebrants and thousands of students around the world? All use the Zoom videoconferencing application to get together while staying apart during the deadly coronavirus pandemic. But amid its newfound fame, the Silicon Valley-based company has come under stepped-up scrutiny over how it handles privacy and security - including allowing uninvited guests to barge in on sessions.

Created by engineer Eric Yuan in 2011 and listed on the Nasdaq a year ago, Zoom has seen its market value skyrocket to some \$35 billion. Yuan has spoken of a passion for communication technologies that dates back to the 1990s when, as a university student in mainland China, he longed for a way to see his girlfriend without needing to travel hours by train. Zoom hit the market as a tool for people working apart to collaborate on business, competing with offerings from the likes of Microsoft, Facebook, Google and others.

### Poker and funerals

As people around the world stay home due to coronavirus risk, Zoom has become a go-to service for remote education, exercise classes, poker games, church services and happy hour celebrations. Cou-

ples have gotten married in "zoomed" ceremonies. Birthdays have been celebrated. Funerals have been virtually attended.

"It's really easy to use, and free; that's nice," said US school teacher Justin Minkel, who instructs students remotely using Zoom. "Just click a link." Home chaos such as dogs barking or outbursts from siblings can be disruptive, but Minkel cures that by "muting" students' microphones until he needs to hear them. According to Yuan, the number of people taking part in Zoom meetings daily eclipsed 200 million in March, up from just 10 million at the end of last year.

Video calls have surged on all messaging platforms including WhatsApp, Messenger, and Google Hangouts, but Zoom has become a star. It lets as many as 100 people simultaneously attend a video-conference, allowing 40 minutes free and then charging for premium accounts that provide more time and features for \$15 monthly. Zoom lifted the 40-minute limit on free accounts for teachers in an array of coun-

tries. Among Zoom settings is an option to chose a backdrop image, such as the Golden Gate Bridge or tropical beach, hiding what is really behind a user.

### Zoombombing

Digital learning coach Stephanie DeMichele credits the surge in Zoom use to fear of being disconnected from schools, friends, families and others in our lives. "And here comes Zoom saying 'It's free, available, and you won't feel isolated,'" said DeMichele. "So people grabbed onto it." A "Zoombombing" phenomenon has sparked warnings about lax security, however. Virtual intruders have interrupted religious ceremonies, remote classes, and other Zoom gatherings. In some cases, pornographic images have been displayed.

US media has reported that Zoom shares some data with third parties and questioned how well virtual meeting data is defended. Prosecutors from several US states including Connecticut, New York, and

Florida are investigating the company's privacy and security practices. The FBI has warned of Zoom sessions being hijacked. Yuan vowed this week to step up data security, and apologized. "We recognize that we have fallen short of the community's - and our own - privacy and security expectations," Yuan said in a message posted online.

"For that, I am deeply sorry." Zoom was designed primarily for use by large businesses with their own tech teams to provide support and protection, according to Yuan. "We did not design the product with the foresight that, in a matter of weeks, every person in the world would suddenly be working, studying, and socializing from home," Yuan said. "These new, mostly consumer use cases have helped us uncover unforeseen issues with our platform."

While encouraged that Zoom is admitting it has security problems, it still has "a ton of work" to do to fix them and restore trust in the platform, according to Electronic Frontier Foundation associate director of research Gennie Gebhart. While tending to its immediate concerns, Zoom would be wise to keep an eye on the future, said Creative Strategies analyst Carolina Milanese. "Replicating what Zoom has is not too difficult," Milanese said. "They need to think about what else they want to be." — AFP



## Funerals have been virtually attended

## For countries in conflict, 'worst is yet to come'

**UNITED NATIONS:** UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Friday renewed his call for a global ceasefire, urging all parties to conflict to lay down arms and allow war-torn nations to combat the coronavirus pandemic. "The worst is yet to come," Guterres said, referring to countries beset with fighting like Syria, Libya and Yemen. "The COVID-19 storm is now coming to all these theatres of conflict."

Guterres said there had been some progress following his March 23 call for peace, but that fighting still rages in a number of countries, hampering the ability to put into place plans to combat the virus. "The need is urgent," Guterres said at a UN press conference. "The virus has shown how swiftly it can move across borders, devastate countries and upend lives." He said that parties to conflict in a number of countries, including Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Colombia, Libya, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, have expressed support for his call.

"But there is a huge distance between declarations and deeds - between translating words into peace on the ground and in the lives of people," Guterres said. "In many of the most critical situations, we have seen no let-up in fighting - and some conflicts have even intensified." While expressing gratitude for support of his earlier call from some 70 countries, NGO groups and religious leaders worldwide including Pope Francis, Guterres said more concrete work was necessary.



NEW YORK: In this handout image, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres holds a virtual press conference on Friday at UN headquarters. — AFP

"We need robust diplomatic efforts to meet these challenges. To silence the guns, we must raise the voices for peace," he said. Guterres did not mention the UN Security Council, where divisions between the United States and China have blocked action. The EU "strongly supports" the call, its foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said after a video conference of the bloc's foreign ministers. "We urge all those involved in armed conflicts anywhere in the world to engage in efforts to find a political solution to the conflict," Borrell told a media conference in Brussels.

### Call for more aid

Since the beginning of the global pandemic, the Security Council has not met once on COVID-19, making no statement or joint resolution. On Thursday the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for inter-

national cooperation and "multilateralism" in addressing the virus, which has infected more than one million worldwide and killed more than 50,000. Guterres appealed for developed countries and multilateral institutions to do more to aid poorer countries face the pandemic. "To act early rather than later is essential... This is particularly true with the developing world," he said.

Guterres noted that the ceasefire in Idlib, Syria is holding but said it needs to be expanded to the entire country to allow full efforts to slow the coronavirus spread. But he also said expressions of support for a ceasefire by different factions fighting in Libya had not ended the violence. "This war is now not allowing the response to COVID-19 to take place," he said. "This is the moment to stop. It's not morally acceptable to continue with this conflict." — AFP

## Alone and in need of a hug in shutdown

**CHICAGO:** Six nights a week, Shelley Howard could normally be found at a restaurant or bar in the famous Rush Street area of Chicago, dining out or having a drink with friends. A naturally social person, Howard, 73, regularly posted online pictures from his nights out, often showing him giving hugs or handshakes. But for the past three weeks, like millions of people around the world, he has seen none of his friends - instead, sitting at home to try to avoid the coronavirus pandemic.

Howard, who still works as a graphic artist in the music industry, lives alone, so the confinement orders and the shutdown of non-essential business have left him isolated and cut off from almost all human contact. "I'm critically aware of that. I posted Springsteen's 'Human Touch' video on my Facebook page last week," Howard said. "I'm a big hugger, and people like me. But it is what it is."

His experience is matched around the globe by those mourning the loss of daily physical contact that was once taken for granted, and which scientists say is vital. "What happens with touch is a very physical change," said Tammy Field, director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine. "The nervous system is slowed. Heart rate decreases, blood pressure decreases, brainwaves change in the direction of



CHICAGO: This handout image shows Shelley Howard at a restaurant on March 12, 2020. — AFP

more relaxation, and that in turn knocks down cortisol, which is the stress hormone."

### Staying in touch

Lilia Chacon, who works as the director of communications for the city of Santa Fe, New Mexico, also yearns for the return of simple human touch in her life. Chacon, 65, lives alone and has been working from home. "This is how fast your reality changes. I'll be watching TV and you'll see people all together at a table, all hugging and I'll say to myself, 'Oh my God, that would never happen today. No way!'" Chacon said. To try to make up for the lack of hugs and handshakes, Chacon said she has been using video chats with friends. "We find ways of maintaining friendships and intimacy. I've been really making a point of staying in touch with my friends in a visual way, not just phone calls." — AFP

International

# China pauses in memory of virus victims and 'martyrs'

World's most populous nation observes nationwide 3-minute silence

**WUHAN:** China came to a standstill yesterday to mourn patients and medical staff killed by the coronavirus, as the world's most populous country observed a nationwide three-minute silence. At 10 am, citizens paused, cars, trains and ships sounded their horns, and air-raid sirens rang out in memory of the more than 3,000 lives claimed by the virus in China. In Wuhan—the city where the virus first emerged late last year—sirens and horns sounded as people fell silent in the streets.

Staff at the Tongji Hospital stood outside with heads bowed towards the main building, some in the protective hazmat suits that have become a symbol of the crisis worldwide. "I feel a lot of sorrow about our colleagues and patients who died," Xu, a nurse at Tongji who worked on the frontlines treating coronavirus patients, told AFP, holding back tears. "I hope they can rest well in heaven." Workers in protective wear paused silently beside barriers at one residential community—a reminder that there are still tight restrictions on everyday life across Wuhan.

“ I hope they can rest well in heaven ”

State media showed Chinese President Xi Jinping and other government officials standing outside a Beijing government compound, wearing white flowers. And in the capital's Tiananmen Square, the national flag flew at half-mast, surrounded by heavier-than-normal security. Pedestrians in one of the city's busiest shopping districts stopped walking and kept their heads low in a silent tribute ceremony, while police patrolling stood at the side of the road with their riot shields down and bowed heads.

"During this process, a lot of people including the medical workers... have made extraordinary contributions. They are all heroes," shopper Wang

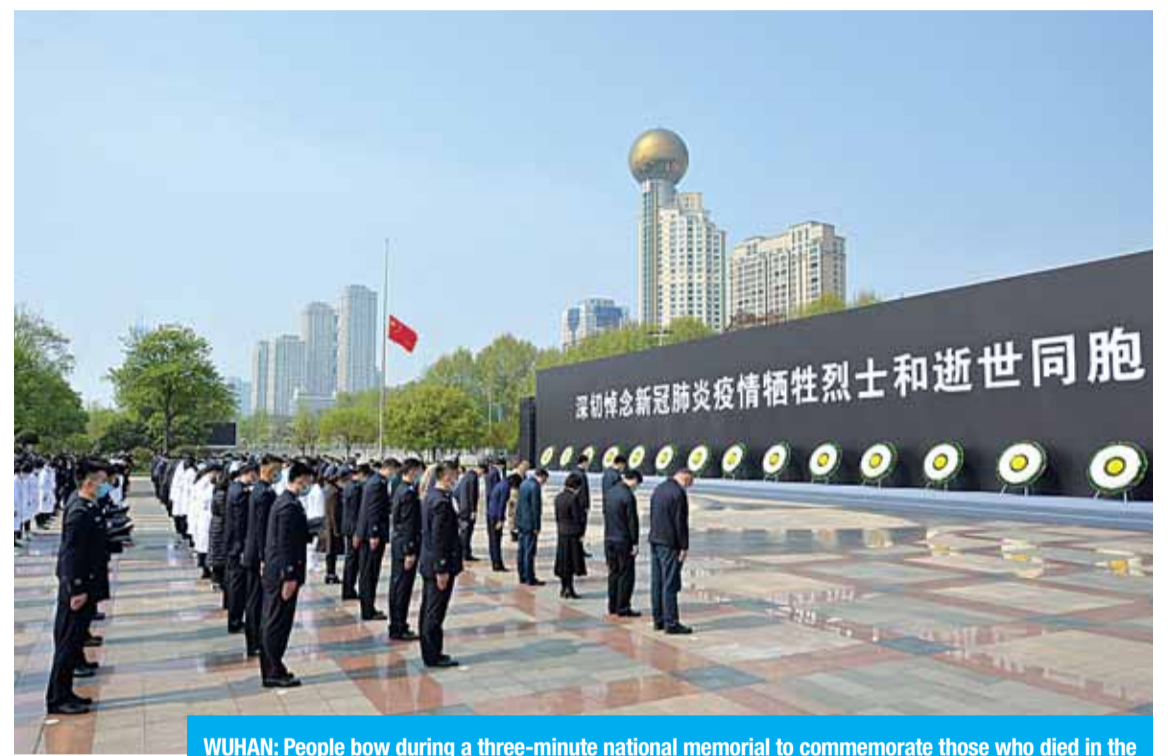
Yongna said. "As ordinary citizens, we should remember this day." Park-goers paused their activities too, some holding badminton rackets by their sides, others with hands together in prayer. Trains on Beijing's subway network also came to a standstill, and AFP saw passengers including children stand silently throughout the three minutes in a mark of respect.

Remembrance

Officials said the observance was a chance to mourn virus "martyrs"—an honorific title bestowed by the government this week on 14 medical workers who died fighting the outbreak. They include Li Wenliang, a doctor and whistleblower in Wuhan who was reprimanded by authorities for trying to warn others in the early days of the contagion.

Li's death from COVID-19 in February prompted a national outpouring of grief as well as anger at the government's handling of the crisis. The ruling Communist Party has sought to direct criticism to local authorities in Hubei province and its capital Wuhan, who have been accused of downplaying the severity of the virus, possibly contributing to its spread. A central government investigation into Li's death concluded he was "inappropriately" punished by Wuhan police.

Despite drastic measures to lock down Hubei in late January, the epidemic has spiralled into a global pandemic with more than one million cases. Some restrictions in Hubei have been eased in recent weeks after the officially stated number of new infections in China dropped to near zero. Yesterday's commemoration also coincided with the annual Qing Ming holiday—the "tomb sweeping" festival—when Chinese people visit the graves of rel-



WUHAN: People bow during a three-minute national memorial to commemorate those who died in the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak yesterday. —AFP

atives and leave offerings in remembrance.

Although China claims to have curbed the spread of the virus, some restrictions were tightened again this week to prevent a second wave of infections. Authorities have discouraged visits to cemeteries to mark the festival. "We advocate people staying home and having small-scale memorials at home to remember the dead," Fan Yu, an official with China's department of social affairs, said this week. At Beijing's enormous Babaoshan cemetery, mourners had to make an online reservation to visit a grave in a limited number of time slots, with only three relatives allowed per tomb.

In Wuhan, some residents burned paper money on the streets Friday, the eve of the festival, instead. "We can only stay at home, we can't go to the graves. We can only remember our relatives at home," a 50-year-old resident surnamed Li told AFP. Cemeteries across China are offering a "cloud tomb-sweeping" service in which families can honor their ancestors by watching a live stream of cemetery staff attending to graves on their behalf. Websites are also offering people the chance to pay their respects at a "virtual" tomb, including by lighting a digital candle and leaving a dish of digital fruit. —AFP

## 'True friend' China helps Algeria battle coronavirus

**ALGIERS:** As adversity strikes in the form of the coronavirus pandemic, Algeria has found a helping hand in China, an old friend and the top exporter to Africa's largest country. An Air Algerie plane arrived in the capital Algiers from Beijing on March 27 carrying a 13-member Chinese medical team and equipment, including respirators, worth around \$450,000.

The supplies were donated by the state-owned China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) on behalf of Beijing to help Algeria battle its COVID-19 outbreak. With 1,171 officially declared cases, including 105 deaths, Algeria is worse hit than its North African neighbors Tunisia and Morocco, and its health sector is in dire need of improvement. China, where the novel coronavirus first emerged in December, has been helping other countries fight the disease, offering masks, experts and equipment.

Algeria, with a population of more than 40 million, has placed orders with China for 100 million face masks, 30,000 testing kits as well as protective medical clothing and other equipment. China is also expected to build a small hospital in the North

African country to provide preventive care for roughly 5,000 Algerians and 4,000 Chinese employed by CSCEC, official Chinese media reported, without providing further details.

Chinese nationals make up the largest group of expatriates in Algeria, estimated at several tens of thousands of people. Most of them are employed on large construction sites, such as for the Grand Mosque of Algiers - one of the world's largest - erected between 2012 and 2019 by the CSCEC group. The company is behind multiple infrastructure projects across Africa, with a base in Algeria. "Algeria has special ties with China," Smail Debeche, a professor of international relations at the University of Algiers, told AFP.

A 'true friend'

These ties "go back to the war of liberation", he said, referring to the decades-long war led by the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) that led to Algeria's independence from colonial power France in 1962. China was the first non-Arab country to recognize Algeria's provisional government (GPRA) when it was established in 1958. Algeria returned the favour by supporting Beijing at the United Nations. Over the years, amid the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and growing "anti-imperialism", the bonds between China and Algeria grew stronger. Algeria, nicknamed by some "the Mecca of revolutionaries", became a key desti-



ALGIERS: In this file photo taken on March 31, 1965, Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella (right) and Chinese Prime minister Chou En Lai wave to the crowd. —AFP

nation for leftist militants from around the world.

And during the decade-long civil war of the 1990s, China bolstered its political, military and economic ties with Algeria, while most Western nations pulled out diplomatic staff out. Although France has maintained a close relationship with its former colony, it has lost out to China in recent years as Algeria's main commercial partner. Franco-Algerian ties struck a sour note when Chinese aid began pouring into Algeria to fight the novel coronavirus. —AFP

## Coronavirus cases in South Asia near 6,000

**MUMBAI:** The number of confirmed new coronavirus cases in South Asia neared 6,000 yesterday, even as authorities in some cities tightened restrictions on movement and warned lockdowns could be extended in a bid to rein in the pandemic. "If people don't obey the rules seriously and cases continue to rise, then there may be no option but to extend the lockdown," Rajesh Tope, the health minister of Maharashtra state which includes the financial hub Mumbai said. "It could be extended in Mumbai and urban areas of Maharashtra by two weeks."

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi said this week the country will pull out of the planned three-week lockdown in a phased manner. India has been hardest hit by the disease in South Asia with some 2,902 cases, of which 68 have died. Maharashtra has 516 confirmed cases of COVID-19 - the disease caused by the coronavirus - and 26 people have died.

While the government does plan to review the

lockdown, set to end on April 14, three senior officials told Reuters this will depend on an assessment of the situation in each state, and lockdowns and restrictions would be extended in districts where the coronavirus case spread has continued. Public transport in large metros such as Mumbai, Bengaluru and Delhi, may only be restored in a phased manner days after the lockdown ends, said the officials, who asked not to be named as the plans were still under discussion.

Restrictions tightened

The number of COVID-19 cases have more than doubled in South Asia in the last week. Health experts warn an epidemic in the region, home to a fifth of the world's population, could overwhelm its already weak public health systems. But Muslim-majority Pakistan and Bangladesh, and India, home to the world's largest Muslim minority, have struggled to convince conservative religious groups to maintain social distancing. On Friday, Pakistani Muslims at a Karachi mosque clashed with baton-wielding police trying to enforce new curbs on gatherings to prevent Friday prayers and contain coronavirus infections, officials said.

This came after the government in the southern province of Sindh, home to the financial hub of

homes," Shtaiwi said. Like much of the globe, authorities in Hamas-run Gaza have imposed strict social distancing measures. All large gatherings have been banned and mosques and schools closed for the immediate future, with residents urged to stay home. The male and female members of Shtaiwi's family prayed together, something which is not permitted in Gaza mosques.

"There is no problem praying with children and families, it is so they can learn," Shtaiwi said. "We are abiding by the home quarantine regulations, we didn't invite anyone from the neighbors or relatives to join us." His 58-year-old father Ali said they prayed that "God protect people from the corona epidemic among us and throughout the world." So far 12 cases have been confirmed in Gaza, all of them placed under quarantine. Thousands of Palestinians who have returned to Gaza via Egypt have also been quarantined as a precautionary measure. —AFP



NEW DELHI: Migrants sit under the shade of a tree as they camp at a government school during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown on Friday. —AFP

Karachi, enforced a three-hour curfew on Friday afternoon, in a bid to persuade Muslim worshippers to pray at home. Pakistan has so far reported 2,547 coronavirus infections, fuelled by a jump in cases related to members of the Tablighi Jamaat, an orthodox Muslim proselytising group. —Reuters



GAZA CITY: Palestinian Saleh Shtaiwi, who usually calls for prayers and leads them at a mosque, leads the Friday prayer for his family at home. —AFP

## Gaza family holds prayers at home

**GAZA:** With mosque closures across the world because of the coronavirus pandemic, one Palestinian imam and his family in the Gaza Strip held their weekly prayers at home on Friday. Saleh Shtaiwi, 24, normally leads the weekly prayers in a mosque close to his Gaza City home. But with mosques closed, the congregation this week comprised his parents, son and other family members gathered in the living room.

After prayers, food was brought out and served in the same place. "Friday prayers is obligatory in the mosque. With mosques closed, we must perform them in our

## Gabon bans eating of pangolin and bats amid pandemic

**LIBREVILLE:** Gabon on Friday banned the sale and eating of bats and pangolins, which are suspected of sparking the novel coronavirus in China where they are highly prized in traditional medicine. President Ali Bongo Ondimba also announced the government was planning to lock down the capital Libreville and unveiled an emergency package for those hard hit by the pandemic. The novel coronavirus is believed to have come from bats, but researchers think it might have spread to humans via another mammal.

Pangolins are critically endangered and have long been protected, but they are sold in the markets of the capital Libreville, as are bats, and their meat is popular. The central African nation is 88 percent covered in forest and hunting and bush meat have long been a way of life. The water and forest ministry said the novel coronavirus was a "combination of two different viruses, one close to bats and the other closer to pangolins", and claimed to be quoting a scientific study published in Nature.

Gabon has declared 21 COVID-19 infections, but none from animals, the ministry said. "A similar decision was taken by the authorities when our country was affected by the Ebola virus—a ban on eating primates," Forestry Minister Lee White said. The national parks agency ANPN announced in mid-March that tourists would no longer be allowed to interact with great apes to avoid any risk of contamination by the coronavirus.

The pangolin, the world's most heavily trafficked mammal, also called the scaly anteater, is believed to have possibly been a vector in the leap of the novel coronavirus from animal to human at a market in China's Wuhan city last year. Its body parts fetch a high price on the black market as they are commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine, although scientists say they have no therapeutic value. Gabon has also put in place a raft of measures such as grounding international flights, closing schools and ordering a night curfew to stop the spread of the coronavirus. —AFP

## Light at tunnel's end: Wuhan's cautious reawakening

**WUHAN:** Cars are back on city streets and shoppers are strolling in malls again as life slowly returns to Wuhan. But the cradle of the global coronavirus pandemic remains under the shadow of the contagion. The city of 11 million people—along with tens of millions more throughout the rest of Hubei province—was locked down in late January in an unprecedented and ultimately failed bid to contain the pathogen.

Hubei and its provincial capital Wuhan have accounted for the majority of China's officially reported 3,322 coronavirus deaths and 81,620 overall cases. But with new infections now virtually nil—according to the much-questioned Chinese government figures—authorities have begun loosening restrictions on movement within the city and easing its isolation from the rest of the country. —AFP

## International

# US, UK, Spain deaths mount; virus threatens war zones

## Coronavirus epidemic claims over 59,000 lives

LONDON: Deaths from the global coronavirus epidemic accelerated again as the US, Spain and Britain grappled with their highest tolls yet and the world economy took a massive hit. With more than 59,000 dead, the threat has never been more stark. Experts warn that the more than one million cases of COVID-19 confirmed globally are probably just a small proportion of total infections, as testing is not widely available.

Prosperous countries in Europe and North America are currently bearing the brunt of the disease but—with infections also reported in war zones and refugee camps—there are fears of a new explosion among the world's most vulnerable. "The worst is yet to come," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, referring to countries beset with fighting like Syria, Libya and Yemen. "The COVID-19 storm is now coming to all these theatres of conflict."

For the moment, the United States accounts for around a quarter of confirmed cases, but Europe is far from being out of danger—Spain reported more than 900 deaths in 24 hours on Friday, for the second day running. While Italy still leads the world in fatalities, France, Belgium and Britain have also been hard hit. The UK government opened a 4,000-bed field hospital on Friday ahead announcing a its highest one-day toll of 684.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is himself entering a second week of isolation with a high temperature after testing positive for the virus, but Queen Elizabeth is to make a historic address to Britain

and the Commonwealth nations on Sunday. The public health battle being waged across the world ebbed and flowed, with Germany saying the rate of new infections is slowing but once confident Singapore closing schools and workplaces to fend off a possible renewed upsurge in cases.

### 'Worst moment of my life'

The virus has now killed more than 10,000 people across Spain, but it spared 29-year-old Javier Lara, who has returned home after being treated in an overburdened intensive care unit and told AFP of his suffering. "I was panicking that my daughter would get infected. When I started showing symptoms, I said I wouldn't hold her or go near her," he said, describing facing death with an eight-week-old as the "worst moment in his life".



### World economy took massive hit

The world economy has been pummeled by the virus and the associated lockdowns, with more than half the population of the planet under some kind of stay-at-home order. The US economy shed 701,000 jobs last month, its worst since March 2009 in the wake of the global financial crisis, boosting the jobless rate to 4.4 percent for the first time in 45 years.

Things were no better in Europe, where analysts from IHS Markit warned that business activity in the 19-nation euro-zone had suffered its worst crunch ever recorded, and the central bank of euro-zone member Ireland said its output could be slashed by 8.3 percent this year. Financial ratings agency Fitch



BERGAMO, Italy: Members of the medical staff give themselves a fist bump while working at the intensive care unit with the COVID-19 patients at the ASST Papa Giovanni XXIII hospital on Friday. — AFP

predicted both the US and euro-zone economies would shrink this quarter by up to 30 percent and the Asian Development Bank warned on Friday the global economy could take a \$4.1 trillion hit—equivalent to five percent of worldwide output.

### China's 14 'martyrs'

China's central bank became the latest to announce special stimulus measures Friday when it cut reserve requirements for smaller banks in order to release around 400 billion yuan (\$56 billion) in liquidity. The outbreak began last year in China, which announced

a day of national mourning on Saturday for those who died fighting against the disease. Fourteen deceased frontline workers will be celebrated as "martyrs" of the epidemic.

In India, where more than one billion people are under lockdown, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called on Indians to hold candles and mobile phones aloft for nine minutes on Sunday to dispel the "darkness and uncertainty" of the pandemic. In the megacity of Mumbai, police barricaded off parts of Dharavi, one of Asia's biggest slums, made world famous by the 2008 film "Slumdog Millionaire". — AFP

## Trump fires intelligence official

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump announced Friday he was firing a senior intelligence official who had a central role in the complaint last August that sparked the impeachment trial of the US leader. In a letter to the Senate Intelligence Committee, Trump said he had lost confidence in Michael Atkinson, the independent inspector general of the broad US intelligence community.

Atkinson reviewed and transmitted an anonymous whistle-blower's complaint in August that alleged that Trump had sought personal political favors from Ukraine in violation of US law. The complaint became the basis for Trump's impeachment, which saw him put through a historic trial for removal in the Senate in January. The president was charged with holding up official military aid to Ukraine in exchange for Kiev helping to smear his expected 2020 election foe, Democrat Joe Biden.

After deciding the complaint had merit, Atkinson, a 55-year-old veteran government attorney, forwarded it to



Michael Atkinson

the Justice Department and to Congress, setting off the impeachment investigation. Atkinson then testified in a closed hearing of the House Intelligence Committee investigating the allegations, at a time when the White House sought to prevent other administration officials from giving evidence. Ultimately Trump was voted not guilty by the Republican-controlled Senate in early February.

He then embarked on a campaign to force from office a number of officials in the White House, State Department and Pentagon who cooperated with the probe. Atkinson, who Trump appointed to his post in 2018, was long understood to be in the president's sights. "It is vital that I have the fullest confidence in the appointees serving as inspectors general," Trump wrote in the letter to the two top senators on the Intelligence Committee, Richard Burr and Mark Warner. "This is no longer the case with regard to this inspector general," he said, without explaining why.

Warner, a Democrat, blasted Trump for what he called "ongoing attempts to politicize the nation's intelligence agencies." "In the midst of a national emergency, it is unconscionable that the president is once again attempting to undermine the integrity of the intelligence community by firing yet another intelligence official simply for doing his job," he wrote. — AFP

## Sailors cheer captain relieved of command

WASHINGTON: US Navy Captain Brett Crozier was cheered by hundreds of sailors as he left the USS Roosevelt docked in Guam after his controversial firing by the Pentagon, videos showed Friday. The respected head of the aircraft carrier, hit by the fast-moving coronavirus pandemic, was removed from his command by Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly Thursday after a letter Crozier wrote pleading with the Pentagon for support for the crew was leaked into the public.

Crozier "demonstrated extremely poor judgment in the middle of a crisis" in his handling of the letter, Modly said. But the crew of the Roosevelt openly signaled their support in videos taken from the ship as he strode alone solemnly down the gangway, saluting briefly to the crew before getting into a waiting car on the pier. "Captain Crozier, Captain Crozier," sailors on the deck of the warship



Brett Crozier

chanted as they clapped. "That's how you send out one of the greatest captains you ever had," an unidentified person can be heard saying on one of the videos posted on social media. Crozier's dismissal came as the Pentagon struggles to maintain the readiness of its air, sea and ground forces around the world as the COVID-19 virus sweeps the globe, all the while providing domestic US support to government efforts to contain the virus and treat the infected.

With dozens of its sailors infected after a five-day official visit to Vietnam, the Roosevelt sailed into the US naval base at Guam in the western Pacific on March 28. On Tuesday, a letter that Crozier wrote to his superiors pleading to vacate as much of the ship as possible and put most of its 4,800 sailors in quarantine on land was leaked to US newspapers, angering the Pentagon leadership. "We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die," he pleaded in the letter.

Pentagon officials said they were doing just as he asked, and bristled at the fact that Crozier distributed the unclassified letter widely, almost ensuring it would leak out. Modly said the letter misrepresented how the Navy was dealing with the ship and caused unnecessary panic. — AFP

## French scientists' remarks spark a storm of criticism

PARIS: Two leading French doctors on Friday insisted they had been misunderstood after sparking a storm of criticism by discussing the idea of testing a vaccine for coronavirus in Africa on television. Although they later apologized for any offence caused if their comments had not been clear, former international and Ivory Coast football star Didier Drogba joined lawyers and a French anti-racism organization in criticizing the remarks made on Wednesday in a broadcast on the LCI channel.

Camille Loch, head of research at the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM) in Lille, was questioned about a shield for coronavirus using the well-known BCG vaccine for tuberculosis. He was asked by Jean-Paul Mira, head of intensive care at the Cochin hospital in Paris, whether Africa offered better conditions for testing the vaccine.

"If I could be provocative, shouldn't we be doing this study in Africa, where there are no masks, no treatment, no intensive care, rather as was done with certain studies on AIDS, where things are tested on prostitutes because it's known that they are highly exposed (to HIV)?" Mira asked. "What do you think?" Loch replied: "You're right, we are thinking in parallel by the way about a study in Africa with the same kind of approach, (but) it doesn't prevent us from being able to think about a study in Europe and Australia at the same time."

Scientists who carry out clinical trials try



JOHANNESBURG: A woman reacts as she receives a flu vaccine while a Gauteng health department official gets ready before collecting samples during a door-to-door coronavirus testing drive in Yeoville on Friday. — AFP

to find conditions in which large numbers of people are exposed to the disease, as this gives a better opportunity for testing a new drug. Such trials are carried out under strict supervision, which requires volunteers to be briefed about any risks and to give their informed consent. But the idea of having Africa as a setting for a coronavirus vaccine is controversial.

### 'Racist'

Africa is the world's poorest continent and its citizens bear the least responsibility for spreading the virus, which originated in China and spread to the Middle East, Europe and the United States through jet travel. At the same time, Africans are badly exposed to the microbe, both in terms of preparedness and health care. Former international football star Drogba was among those who criticised the remarks about testing in Africa.

"It is inconceivable that we continue to accept this. Africa is not a laboratory. I strongly denounce these very serious, racist and contemptuous words," the former Chelsea and Marseille striker wrote on his Facebook page and on Twitter. "Help us save lives in Africa and stop the spread of the virus that is destabilizing the whole world instead of seeing us as guinea pigs. It is absurd." A French anti-racism NGO, SOS Racisme, issued a statement saying, "No, Africans aren't guinea pigs" and described the comparison with AIDS and prostitutes as "problematic" and "unwelcome." But in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the head of the national biological research institute, Jean-Jacques Muyembe, suggested that the country was prepared to take part in any testing of a future vaccine. "We've been chosen to conduct these tests. We're candidates," Muyembe said, suggesting that clinical trials could begin in July or August. — AFP

## UK Labor unveils new leader to replace Corbyn

LONDON: Britain's main opposition Labor party yesterday unveils a new leader who will take the helm of a defeated and divided party in the midst of the coronavirus crisis. Keir Starmer, a former director of state prosecutions and Labor's Brexit spokesman, is the runaway favorite to win the ballot of around 500,000 party members and succeed Jeremy Corbyn.

The announcement will be a low-key affair, with a planned special conference cancelled due to restrictions on social gatherings imposed to stem the spread of COVID-19. Instead, the result will be put out in a press release mid-morning—and candidates have been asked to pre-record their victory speeches. Smart and studious, but accused of lacking charisma, Starmer has vowed to get the party back in shape after December's general election, when it suffered its worst result since the 1930s.

Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson triumphed by winning parliamentary seats in Labor's former industrial heartlands. It was Corbyn's second election defeat—the fourth for Labor since it left office in 2010—and he was forced to resign. Starmer has now promised to unite the party after years



Lisa Nandy

Keir Starmer

Rebecca Long-Bailey

of bitter arguments about Corbyn's socialist agenda, Brexit and the leadership's handling of claims of anti-Semitism.

"We get the chance to rebuild our party and our movement and, more importantly than that, the chance to put Labour where it needs to be back, which is back in power," he told supporters on a video conference call on Thursday. Starmer says he is a socialist driven by the desire to reduce inequality, but his pragmatic approach has attracted support from centrists in the party—and suspicions on the left. His main rival is Rebecca Long-Bailey, Labor's business spokeswoman and a close Corbyn ally. A third candidate, backbench MP Lisa Nandy, is viewed as a long shot.

### 'Bad blood and mistrust'

Labor grew out of the trade union movement but moved to the political centre under former prime minister Tony Blair, who was in office between 1997 and 2007. Corbyn had spent a lifetime on the sidelines because of his left-wing views, and his election as leader in 2015, on the back of a huge surge in party membership, was a shock. MPs and party members have been locked in an ideological battle ever since. "There's really a lot of bad blood and mistrust," said Steven Fielding, a political expert at the University of Nottingham. "The first challenge (of the new leader) will be to put a team together that at least looks like it has the ability to unify the party." — AFP



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## Business

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BRUSSELS: In this photo taken on Feb 14, 2020 the US multinational technology and Internet-related services company Google's logo is pictured. — AFP

# Google to publish user location data

## Reports on users' movements to be made available on special website

PARIS: Google says it will publish users' location data around the world from Friday to allow governments to gauge the effectiveness of social distancing measures, brought in to stem the COVID-19 pandemic. The reports on users' movements in 131 countries will be made available on a special website and will "chart movement trends over time by geography", according to a post on one of Google's blogs.

Trends will display "a percentage point increase or decrease in visits" to locations like parks, shops, homes and places of work, not "the absolute number of visits," said the post, signed by Jen Fitzpatrick, who leads Google Maps, and the company's chief health officer Karen DeSalvo. For example, in France, visits to restaurants, cafes, shopping centers, museums or theme parks have

plunged by 88 percent from their normal levels, the data showed.

Local shops initially saw a jump of 40 percent when confinement measures were announced, before suffering a drop of 72 percent. Office use is possibly stronger than suspected meanwhile, as the decline in that area is a more modest 56 percent. "We hope these reports will help support decisions about how to manage the COVID-19 pandemic," the Google execs said.

"This information could help officials understand

changes in essential trips that can shape recommendations on business hours or inform delivery service offerings." Like the detection of traffic jams or traffic measurement Google Maps, the new reports will use "aggregated, anonymised" data from users who have activated their location history.

No "personally identifiable information," such as an individual's location, contacts or movements, will be made available, the post said. The reports will also employ a statistical technique that adds "artificial noise" to raw data,

making it harder for users to be identified. From China to Singapore to Israel, governments have ordered electronic monitoring of their citizens' movements in an effort to limit the spread of the virus, which has infected more than a million people and killed over 50,000 worldwide.

In Europe and the United States, technology firms have begun sharing "anonymised" smartphone data to better track the outbreak. Even privacy-loving Germany is considering using a smartphone app to help manage the spread of the disease. But activists say authoritarian regimes are using the coronavirus as a pretext to suppress independent speech and increase surveillance. In liberal democracies, others fear widespread data harvesting and intrusion could bring lasting harm to privacy and digital rights. — AFP



**Local shops initially saw a jump of 40%**

## South Africa rolls out mobile testing in virus lockdown

JOHANNESBURG: South African public healthcare workers dispersed into the buzzing streets of Johannesburg's Yeoville neighborhood on Friday as Africa's worst virus-hit country rolled out mass door-to-door testing for COVID-19. Armed with screening questionnaires and testing kits, medics and volunteers set up their testing station on the front porch of a block of flats in the gritty business neighborhood.

Nurse Xola Dlomo told AFP they were asking one resident to mobilise fellow flat dwellers to come for screening and tests. "They've been coming for screening and they are even open to testing if they have symptoms," Dlomo said. Already in a 21-day lockdown, South Africa is now embarking on the widespread testing and quarantine campaign involving some 10,000 field workers who are being sent out into homes in villages, towns and cities to screen for symptoms.

The testing plan to break the chain of infection appears to be modeled on the South Korean strategy which saw the Asian country bring the outbreak under control. In Yeoville—a crime-prone area in Johannesburg's hardscrabble central business district—eight small groups have been dispatched across an area covering one square kilometer. "The health of our people is our first consideration," said Kegorapetse Ndinganga, overseeing the Yeoville team.



MAMELODI, South Africa: People wearing facemasks are seen using their mobile phones at Mams Mall near Pretoria on March 29, 2020. — AFP

### Scaling up testing

With his head tilted back, 58-year-old Michael Moshone, braced for his nasal swab, seated on a brick staircase in Yeoville. "It is a little bit uncomfortable but you've got to be strong... because you want to know exactly what is going on with you," Moshone, wrapped in a green, gold and black scarf, said after his sample was taken. Before the rollout of mass screening and testing, more than 47,500 tests had been performed, 6,000 of them at public health centers. But for Health Minister Zweli Mkhize that number is too low for a country of 57 million people where several millions have underlying conditions such as HIV and TB.

The turnout was slow on the first day, Dlomo said. But for Moshone who has lived in the area for 26 years, the trickle of people is no surprise. It reminds him of the early 1990s when HIV first emerged in the country, which now has the

world's highest HIV prevalence rate. "In South Africa, this thing is like HIV because when HIV started here... we didn't take it seriously until we saw people dying," he said. But Dlomo is hopeful that visibility of health care workers in communities will push people to realise "that this thing is serious and they need to take precautions".

World Health Organization technical officer Mary Stephen told AFP that based on how the virus has spread through other countries, governments are urged to scale up public awareness, surveillance and medical care. South Africa's public National Health Laboratory Service (NHL) has secured 67 mobile vans to ramp up testing across the country. Currently the state will be able to carry out 5,000 tests in 24 hours at 10 laboratories countrywide, but at full capacity it can process 30,000 tests each day. — AFP

## Oil price barrels ahead as OPEC flags meeting

LONDON: The price of crude oil surged again Friday after OPEC said it would talk to non-members, notably Russia, giving investors hope that they will stop a price war which has created market chaos along with crushed demand because of the coronavirus. The Saudi-led OPEC group of oil producers and their allies will meet Monday via video conference, a source close to the cartel said. "There's certainly a lot of optimism that a deal is going to be done," OANDA analyst Craig Erlam told AFP.

Global stock markets fell following another set of devastating American employment numbers, gloomy eurozone services data and news that the number of declared COVID-19 infections had hit one million worldwide. The US economy shed 701,000 jobs in March amid the damage inflicted by the coronavirus shutdowns—several times the market's consensus forecast - while the unemployment rate surged to 4.4 percent, the Labor Department reported.

### 'Likely to worsen'

"The markets are digesting a larger-than-expected drop in March employment, which is likely to worsen on the heels of the past two weeks of spikes in jobless claims that approached the 10 million mark," said analysts at the Charles Schwab brokerage. OPEC's move meanwhile sparked fresh speculation of an oil production cut, one day after US President Donald Trump sparked a record crude price rally by hinting that Russia and Saudi Arabia planned to end their price war with a sharp reduction in output. According to a Russian source cited by the TASS agency, US officials have also been invited to take part in the meeting. "It is in all parties' interests to agree to a significant cut," said Michael Hewson, an analyst at CMC Markets. —AFP

## Business

## IMF sees coronavirus-induced global downturn 'way worse'

## Pandemic plunges the world into a recession

WASHINGTON: The coronavirus pandemic has brought the global economy to a standstill and plunged the world into a recession that will be "way worse" than the global financial crisis a decade ago, the head of the International Monetary Fund said on Friday, calling it "humanity's darkest hour." The IMF's managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, speaking at a rare joint news conference with the leader of the World Health Organization (WHO), called on advanced economies to step up their efforts to help emerging markets and developing countries survive the economic and health impact of the pandemic.

"This is a crisis like no other," she told some 400 reporters on a video conference call. "We have witnessed the world economy coming to a standstill. We are now in recession. It is way worse than the global financial crisis" of 2008-2009. World Bank President David Malpass echoed her outlook in a post on LinkedIn, writing, "Beyond the health impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, we are expecting a major global recession." More than 1 million people worldwide have been infected with COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, and more than 53,000 have died, a Reuters tally showed on Friday.

Georgieva said the IMF was working with the World Bank and WHO to advance their call for China

“  
humanity's  
darkest hour  
”

and other official bilateral creditors to suspend debt collections from the poorest countries for at least a year until the pandemic subsides. She said China had engaged "constructively" on the issue, and the IMF would work on a specific proposal in coming weeks with the Paris Club of creditor nations, the Group of 20 major economies and the World Bank for review at the annual Spring Meetings, which will be held online in about two weeks.

In his posting, Malpass said a debt standstill could begin on May 1, providing added liquidity for the poorest countries as they battle the disease. During the suspension period, he said, the World Bank and the IMF could evaluate the sustainability of those countries' debt and the possible need for a debt reduction by official creditors and commercial creditors.

## 'Humanity's darkest hour'

Emerging markets and developing economies have been hard hit by the crisis, Georgieva said, noting that nearly \$90 billion in investments had already flowed out of emerging markets, far more than during the financial crisis. Some countries are also suffering from sharp drops in commodity prices. More than 90 countries - nearly half the IMF's 189 members - have asked for emergency funding from the IMF to respond to the pandemic, she said. The IMF and WHO have called for emergency aid to be used mainly to strengthen health systems, pay doctors and nurses, and buy protective gear.

Georgieva said the IMF stood ready to use as much of its "war chest" of \$1 trillion in financing capability as needed. The IMF has begun disbursing funds to requesting countries, including Rwanda, with requests from two additional African nations to be reviewed on Friday, she said. "This is, in my lifetime, humanity's darkest hour - a big threat to the whole world - and it requires from us to stand tall, be united, and protect the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens," she said.

She said central banks and finance ministers had already taken unprecedented steps to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and stabilize markets, but more work was needed to keep liquidity flowing, espe-



cially to emerging markets. To that end, the IMF's board in coming days would review a proposal to create a new short-term liquidity line to help provide funds to countries facing problems. Georgieva also urged central banks and particularly the US Federal Reserve to continue offering swap lines to emerging economies. — Reuters

## Pandemic damage: US employment plunges

WASHINGTON: As the US economy craters, crippled by coronavirus shutdowns, businesses jettisoned jobs at an alarming rate last month, government data showed Friday, and the situation will get dramatically worse. US employment plunged by 701,000 in March and the jobless rate surged to 4.4 percent, the Labor Department reported. Yet the department acknowledged its statistics could not yet capture the full extent of the damage, and its own weekly data on first-time claims for jobless benefits showed 10 million people lost their jobs in the last two weeks of the month.

With COVID-19 cases topping a million worldwide, a quarter of which are in the United States where the death toll is over 6,000, cities have turned into ghost towns and officials are struggling to find ways to ease the ruinous damage to the economy and individuals. "The drop in payrolls in March was unprecedented for the start of a recession and will get more than twenty times worse in April," said Diane Swonk of Grant Thornton. "We will easily lose more than twice as many jobs as we lost during the Great Recession during the first two months of this crisis alone," she said in an analysis.

The monthly report reveals the worst monthly job loss since the depths of the global financial crisis in March 2009 and the biggest single-month jump in the jobless rate in more than 45 years. However, the Labor Department said it "cannot precisely quantify the effects of the pandemic on the job market in March," and errors in counting those who lost jobs mean the unemployment rate was likely a full point higher. Economists predict the figures in April will be devastating, with a double digit unemployment rate and as many as 20 million jobs destroyed.

The leisure and hospitality sector-among the first to feel the impact of the travel restrictions imposed to contain the virus-lost 459,000 jobs last month, the report said. But the harm was widespread and notable losses also were recorded in healthcare, retail and business services. The data were released on the same day as the government began a new program to encourage businesses to retain workers and rehire those who were laid off.

## Markaz: GCC, global markets trounced amid pandemic

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre 'Markaz' recently released its Monthly Markets Review report for the month of March 2020. Markaz report stated that, Kuwait and other GCC markets continued their downward spiral amidst coronavirus spread and oil price crash, as countries impose strict measures to curb the spread of COVID-19.

GCC governments and Central Banks initiate reforms to soften its impact on the economy. The report stated that Kuwait All Share Index registered a loss, decreasing by 20.6 % in March. Among Kuwait's Blue Chip companies, Agility Public Warehousing was the biggest loser, falling by 28.4% as lockdowns cause supply chain disruptions. S&P has downgraded Kuwait's credit ratings from AA to AA- with stable outlook, citing lower oil prices and slow pace of reforms.

Following the US Fed's lead, Central Bank of Kuwait has cut its policy rate twice this month, by a cumulative 125 bps. Fitch Rating has opined that Kuwait's banks are better placed than its GCC peers to handle the current crisis. However, with rate cuts and measures such as delayed loan repayments expected to affect the sector's profitability, banking sector index has decreased by 23.0% for the month.

While Consumer goods sector was the top gainer at 2.2%, Consumer services sector was the top loser, falling by 28.0%. Regionally, the S&P GCC composite index declined by 18.2% for the month, with all markets posting losses. With businesses across sectors affected by coronavirus spread, oil price crash has fueled further declines in share prices. Dubai registered the highest loss, declining by 31.6%. Saudi Arabia ended the month losing 14.7%.

Qatar has fallen the least, stemming its losses at 13.5%. S&P has affirmed its current sovereign credit ratings for Saudi Arabia and Qatar at A- and AA-



LOS ANGELES: In this photo taken on March 5, 2020, a jobseeker fills out an application at a career fair hosted by the Los Angeles Mission. — AFP

But House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the government needs to do much more to soften the blow, and "extend and expand" on the \$2.2 trillion rescue package known as CARES passed just one week ago. "It is imperative that we go bigger and further assisting small business, to go longer in unemployment benefits ... and to give families additional direct payments," Pelosi said in a statement, calling for a relentless bipartisan effort to pass a second stimulus bill.

## Underestimating the damage

"This is terrible but unfortunately it's nothing compared to what's coming in April," said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics, who predicts a jobless rate of 12 to 14 percent next month. The two surveys that make up the closely-watched monthly government jobs report are taken during the week that includes the 12th of the month, which in March was before the most restrictive of the lockdowns were imposed that closed businesses nationwide.

That means the "surveys predated many coronavirus-related business and school closures," the report said. Even if it underestimates the true job losses, the payroll drop was far larger than analysts had forecast. Government economists, in an effort to capture the virus impact on the labor market, changed its methods and classified workers as unemployed if they were "absent from work due to coronavirus-related business closures." — AFP

respectively, citing strong fiscal buffers. UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar had announced fiscal and monetary stimulus over the month. The fiscal stimulus aided markets in limiting the losses. Following the US Fed, the central banks in GCC economies had also cut interest rates.

Markaz report also stated that among the GCC Blue Chip companies, Saudi Telecom had gained 5.9%, Emirates NBD has declined by 42.4%. The bank has taken measures such as deferment of loan repayments to help borrowers. The performance of Global equity markets was negative with the MSCI World Index losing 13.5% for the month. US equities (S&P 500) fell by 12.5% in March. US Fed has cut its policy rate twice this month, to near zero.

It also announced quantitative easing (QE) and other measures to ensure liquidity and credit flows to household. The Fed's strong action was construed as signaling a negative outlook, pushing the markets down. US has passed a \$2 trillion stimulus package to support its economy. The UK market (FTSE 100 index) closed 13.8% lower during March. UK has also cut rates, initiated QE and has pledged a fiscal stimulus. Emerging markets ended the month in negative, with the MSCI EM posting monthly loss of 15.6%.

China's Shanghai A-share index has declined by only 4.5%, aided by slowdown in spread of the virus, resumption of factory activities and monetary policy stimulus. Oil prices closed at \$22.7 per barrel at the end of March 2020, which is 55.0% lower than February 2020. Earlier this month, talks between OPEC+ allies broke off with Russia refusing to agree to further production cut. Saudi Arabia retaliated by decreasing price of its oil to some of its customers and announced plans to increase its oil output by 2 million barrels per day. Notwithstanding the weakening demand due to coronavirus, these developments have pushed the oil price to record lows. As lower oil price would also affect shale producers, US is taking efforts to end the oil price war. Gold has marginally decreased by 0.9% over the month. It has been a volatile month for the yellow metal. While spread of the virus moved investors to the safe haven asset, fiscal stimulus and investors selling the metal to cover their positions pushed prices down.



WOODBURY, Minnesota: This file photo taken on Aug 25, 2011 shows the 3M headquarters. — AFP

## Facing Trump's wrath, 3M vows to boost mask production

WASHINGTON: 3M has defended its handling of production and distribution of desperately needed masks to combat the coronavirus pandemic after President Donald Trump threatened to punish the US manufacturing giant for not shifting all distribution back home.

Trump's reprimand sparked an online pile-on against the company, and a warning by Canada against the White House restricting cross border trade in critical medical equipment. Some critics accused 3M, whose production operations are worldwide, of unpatriotic behavior because it continued to sell some of its N95 respirators in other countries including Canada. "We hit 3M hard today after seeing what they were doing with their Masks," Trump tweeted Thursday night, when he invoked a wartime law to compel 3M to produce more masks for American hospitals.

"Big surprise to many in government as to what they were doing - will have a big price to pay!" In a statement Friday 3M said its facilities "have gone above and beyond to manufacture as many N95 respirators as possible for the US market." But it also said it would cause "significant humanitarian implications" if it stopped distributing masks in markets like Canada and Latin America, and would lead some countries to "retaliate" in kind.

Trump's tweet prompted a warning by Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. It would be "a mistake," he told reporters, to reduce cross-border trade in medical goods during such a crisis, especially since thousands of Canadians commute daily to work in Michigan's health system. "I am confident that the close and deep relationship between Canada and US will hold strong and that we will not have to see interruptions in supply chain in either direction."

The Minnesota-based 3M faced fury from people who accused the company-and its distributors-of ignoring US needs and selling masks abroad to the highest bidder. "3M distributors need to IMMEDIATELY stop the export of N95 masks to foreign countries while we need them here," Republican congressman Lance Gooden fumed. "Companies need to step up and put AMERICA FIRST." 3M's chief executive pushed back against the attacks. "The idea that 3M is not doing all it can to fight price gouging and unauthorised reselling is absurd," Mike Roman told US broadcaster CNBC.

3M is redirecting an additional 10 million of its China-made masks per month to the US beginning this week, Roman said. He added that the company, already producing 35 million masks monthly, decided in January that it needed to double its domestic production. US health facilities, overburdened as they treat a global high of 258,000 coronavirus infections and rising, have warned their personal protective equipment stockpiles are at critically low levels and some may run out within days. — AFP

## Albania anchovy sales boom as lockdowns promote tinned food

DURRES: Businesses worldwide have gone dark under coronavirus shutdowns, but in Albania, the anchovy trade is booming as demand for the tinned delicacy surges among European households. In the port of Durres, on Albania's Adriatic coast, around 50 women covered from head to toe in face masks, gloves and purple coats pack the salted fish for shipment to Italy and Spain, the countries hardest-hit by COVID-19.

Working swiftly and meticulously, they wash cured anchovies, dry them and remove bones from fillets that then go into tins or vacuum-packed sleeves. The Nettuno factory has been forced to reduce staff to respect social distancing measures in Albania, which has been under lockdown for weeks in hopes stemming the number of COVID-19 deaths, which now stand at 16. And yet the factory is trying to ramp up output to meet demand for the canned fish among Europeans hunkered down under coronavirus quarantines.

Before the pandemic, the factory exported more than 25,000 kilos of canned anchovies per month to Italy and Spain. Today, orders are up 30 percent to "34,000 kilos per month," said Orlando Salvatore, the Italian owner of Nettuno, one of a dozen companies in the sector. He says the craze is driven by Italian and Spanish families using pantry items to spice up home cooking. "The anchovy has gained even more value because people who are in confinement are making pizza at home, which has greatly increased sales," he said.

## Paid by the kilo

Salvatore says he plans to open in May another factory in Albania - the third biggest anchovies exporter to the EU last year - that will double production. The fish they are processing now were caught in 2019. This year's fishing season starts in April, and is likely to be disrupted by coronavirus restrictions.

In the meantime, factory staff are tired but relieved to still have jobs when many others are losing income. Roughly 30,000 companies have been forced to close in the poor Balkan state due to coronavirus measures, and many families don't have savings to live on. "We are happy that the anchovies we produce here go to Europe, to Spain, to France, and that sales are good despite this difficult period," says Landa Tabaku, a worker in her forties. Anchovy processors are paid 1.5 euros (\$1.62) for each kilo they package. For Tabaku, that comes to about 30 euros a day. — AFP



DURRES, Albania: A workers sorts through anchovies at a fish factory on March 28, 2020. — AFP

## Business

# Coronavirus hits Africa economies, states warn of devastating impact

## A plea for a 'Marshall Plan'

NIAMEY: Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou on Friday appealed for a "Marshall Plan" to help African economies hit by the coronavirus pandemic as more states warned of a devastating impact on the continent's growth. "Even before the pandemic, Africa needed a Marshall Plan for its development, to fight poverty. This pandemic is a further argument to justify the need for a plan," Issoufou said in an interview on the French news channel France 24.



### South Sudan and Somalia - most exposed

"Even more-developed countries are overwhelmed," said Issoufou, whose landlocked Sahel state is one of the poorest in the world.

"Our means are weaker, our health systems are more fragile. So we need a very strong show of solidarity to confront this crisis." The Marshall Plan, named after the then US secretary of state, George Marshall, who conceived it, was a program of aid to rebuild the economies of western Europe after World War II.

Issoufou spoke after his country, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso gave early notice that the pandemic has devastated their prospects for growth. Burkina Faso on Thursday slashed its expectations of GDP growth for 2020 from 6.3 percent to two percent. On Tuesday, Ivory Coast estimated its growth rate would be halved to 3.6 percent, while Niger Finance Minister Mamadou

Diop predicted growth this year would be 4.1 percent, compared with an earlier forecast of 6.9 percent.

The country's budget deficit would widen from an expected 2.6 percent of GDP to 3.7 percent, Diop said. Like neighboring Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are in the grip of bloody jihadist revolt that has claimed thousands of lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Niger alone is hosting nearly 450,000 people. On Thursday, the UN's World Food Program (WFP) said more than five million people in those three countries are facing hunger.

"Our message to the world is clear - look away now and the consequences will be no less than catastrophic," its West Africa director, Chris Nikoi, said. Other parts of Africa could be hit by a shock to food supplies. Sub-Saharan Africa imported more than 40 million tons of cereals last year - a lifeline that could be crimped by the shock to world trade. Somalia and South Sudan are the most exposed to any disruption in grain supplies, while others such as Angola, Nigeria and Chad depend on exports to pay for food imports, the WFP warned.

### Aid and debt relief

As the pandemic starts to bite, much of the focus on aid for Africa is on debt alleviation. On March 25, the IMF and World Bank urged a freeze on debt repayments "to provide a global sense of relief for developing countries as well as a strong signal to financial markets." That came two days after African ministers called for \$100 billion in "immediate emergency economic stimulus" including the waiver of debt interest payments. France and the European Union have responded positively to the call for help, but European budgets are already badly under strain because of the crisis.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire on Thursday said he supported a debt moratorium for "the poorest countries" and a \$500-billion increase

Lazare station, one of Paris's main railway hubs usually jammed with people from the suburbs and Normandy region, footsteps echo in empty corridors. Line 1, where tourists on their way to the Louvre museum and the Champs-Élysées usually rub shoulders with bankers and stock brokers heading for the La Défense business district, is eerily empty.

At Chatelet-Les Halles, the biggest underground station in Europe, where five metro lines and three suburban ones converge, one man gets off and two get on. The casts of Greek and Roman statues that decorate the platform at Louvre-Rivoli shine in the dark, while at the next station serving the world's most visited museum itself, two people get off. Tuileries and its gardens, normally thronged with tourists and Parisian flâneurs, are both closed.

### Few masks or gloves

Diane, a 28-year-old physiotherapist, gets on at Nation without gloves or a mask as she heads out into the suburbs to work in a retirement home. Her boss has given out protective equipment to be used on the job but not while travelling to work. Paris pharmacies have long sold out of masks. "It doesn't worry me," she told AFP. "People are being careful, except some young people sometimes, to be a bit rebellious." Apart from that, no one goes near each other, she said, her hands kept firmly in her pockets.

Of the 15 people left on the long train, only three are wearing masks, while another has a scarf wrapped around their face. Passengers' only real complaint is that there are fewer trains running - 30 percent less or so since France went into lockdown on March 17 - and around 50 smaller stations are closed. Lest they forget the paranoia of the times we are living through, loudspeakers regularly remind them to keep their distance and wash their hands.—AFP

### Ghost stations

So she stays standing looking out of the window with her back to the door just in case. Even at Saint



PARIS: A man walks along the metro station platform as he waits for the subway train on April 1, 2020. — AFP

## Not that tech savvy? Remit money using LuLu Money

KUWAIT: With social distancing and other public restrictions forcing people to stay indoors, LuLu Exchange—one of Kuwait's leading remittances company, is finding an increase in takers for its easy-to-use mobile app, LuLu Money. The app enjoys a rating of 4.3 on the Playstore and has witnessed a boom in transactions in recent days, owing largely to its single-window PIN access, which makes it easy for even non tech-savvy customers to use it.

This simplified yet secure approach has seen registrations increase multi-fold, as expats from India, Philippines and APAC region, as well as from Egypt and other neighboring GCC countries, turn to the digital solution to remit money home. "Customer conven-

ience and security has been at the heart of our technological innovations.

Our app is mobile in every sense of the world. It is light to use, secure and enables transactions smoothly and effectively without confusing users who aren't very tech savvy. During this period of social distancing, we encourage our existing customers to avail the benefits of our user-friendly app and transact via it from the safety of their homes", said Adeb Abaded, LuLu Financial Group.

Once on the app, customers can avail exciting offers, track best exchange rates in real-time and send money instantly. The app also comes with a hybrid function for customers who want the branch experience yet want to avoid rush hours, with the option to block real-time rates for up to 4 hours and then make the payment at the branch within this stipulated timeframe. As of going to the press, 20 branches of the company are open: adhering to the safety precautions issued by the government. The operational status of these branches is being updated regularly, in line with the directives of the government.



ABIDJAN: A general view of the Port of Abidjan on March 31, 2020. The port's Director, Hien Sie announced that the traffic in the port of Abidjan, a leader in West Africa and representing 90 percent of the external trade of the Ivory Coast, should fall in 2020, due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

in special drawing rights (SDRs), the currency of the IMF. He also suggested "a swift new credit line to complement swap lines between central banks" to support countries are most in need. Swap lines are temporary reciprocal currency arrangements between central banks primarily aimed to keep liquidity in the currency available, especially for countries which have debt in US dollars.

"Even if you solve the problem in Europe it will

not be solved if it is not solved everywhere," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borell observed on Friday, after talks with the 27 member countries. "Africa is of particular concern to us because the pandemic there could get out of control very rapidly." EU development ministers will hold talks next Wednesday on putting together a financial package, based on contributions from EU institutions as well as member state governments.—AFP

## China releases \$56 billion to banks in virus response

BEIJING: China's central bank said Friday it would cut the reserve requirements for smaller banks to release around 400 billion yuan (\$56.3 billion) in liquidity, a move to counter the coronavirus impact on enterprises. The People's Bank of China (PBOC) said in a statement it will also slash the interest it pays on financial institutions' excess reserves for the first time in 12 years, to encourage them to use the cash rather than store it with the central bank.

The moves are the latest in a series of fund injections to help the world's second-largest economy through the fallout from the COVID-19 crisis. The reserve requirement ratio (RRR) for small and medium-sized banks will be cut by 100 basis points over two tranches, on April 15 and May 15 respectively, said the PBOC.

This reduces the amount of cash the banks must hold and is aimed at boosting support for small, medium and micro enterprises, the PBOC added. The cuts target rural financial institutions and city commercial banks that operate only at the provincial level. While China's larger enterprises have mostly resumed near-regular operations as the country eased restrictions aimed at curbing the coronavirus spread, smaller firms have been lagging behind.

The aim is to "effectively increase stable funding sources" and help reduce the interest rates that enterprises are subject to, said a PBOC spokesman Friday. The measure is also expected to benefit around 4,000 smaller banks, which make up the vast majority of institutions in the banking system. The PBOC said Friday it will also be reducing the interest rate on banks' excess deposits from April 7, from 0.72 percent to 0.35 percent. It pays interest on banks' excess reserves, and the last time it adjusted the rate was in 2008.

ING chief economist for Greater China Iris Pang said: "The cut suggests that damages from the coronavirus outbreak globally could linger at least until May." But she added the effectiveness of the RRR cuts remains questionable as the reserve ratio for smaller banks is already low, and that banks have been reluctant to lend to troubled SMEs in the pandemic. On Tuesday, China had said it would increase the financing quotas of small- and medium-sized banks by one trillion yuan, with authorities intending to guide smaller banks to lend all the funds they receive at preferential rates.—AFP

The company has assigned dedicated customer care numbers and a robust back-end team to ensure a seamless user experience. The LuLu Money app which is available on both Android & iOS, has over 350,000 downloads worldwide, and counts Kuwait as one of its key user bases. In the last two weeks alone, the app has registered a 40% Month-on-Month growth, in Kuwait. Overall, the app has registered an annual growth of 106% in the country.



## Hujailan urges Asia, Africa to support the economy

KUWAIT: The President of the International Federation of Asian and African Trade Unions Saud Al-Hujailan called on the countries of the Asian and African continents as a whole to support the economy in all its sectors affected by the consequences of the novel coronavirus, whose victims are mainly workers, indicating that any failure to support any of the affected economic sectors will be negatively reflected on the entire country due to demobilization, as unemployment has serious consequences for the society.

He stated in a statement that the economy is an integrated bloc, and any governmental failure to support workers in the private sectors will cause an unforeseeable humanitarian catastrophe, and our role at the International Federation of Asian and African Trade Unions seeks to protect the interests of workers and defend them.

Therefore, the affected private sectors must be supported, and governments must protect the rights of workers from layoffs and achieve job security to protect them. Therefore, developed countries are developing contingency plans to preserve the strength of their economy starting from protecting the rights of their workers in light of the possible wave of collapses.

Hujailan stressed that major countries sensed this matter, as America approved a two trillion dollar economic aid package for all companies affected by the repercussions of coronavirus, which forced them to stop work and production to enable them to retain their employees and avoid devastating losses, in addition to the approval of the German cabinet for aid to save jobs and companies with ongoing studies of labor retention procedures for part-time work.

He pointed out that the economic reality revealed the bankruptcy of the major companies that were able to stand on their feet again because of government support for them and not abandoning them, pointing out that closing any company, institution, factory or sector means unemployment of thousands and spread of chaos and the search for bad sources of income may turn societies into a time bomb.

Hujailan called on the Kuwaiti government to follow the experiences of the previous countries to preserve the rights of workers during this crisis and provide urgent support to prevent the collapse of any economic sector in the country, and recover the affected economic sectors and maintain employment that we will not be able to compensate in the event of their loss and demobilization, indicating that Kuwait was able to attract the most qualified workers from countries and their loss means losing an important part of the Kuwaiti body.

He concluded that we at the International Federation of Asian and African Trade Unions support employees in various fields and strive to give them their full and undiminished rights, explaining that abandoning employees at this time is economic suicide and continuous paralysis that carries great dangers in the long run and very bad results on the international economic body.

# As coronavirus surge looms, field hospitals emerge in US

WASHINGTON: Convention centers, sports arenas, and parking lots from Los Angeles to Miami are being urgently converted into makeshift hospitals as authorities brace for a surge in coronavirus patients. A Navy hospital ship, the USNS Comfort, has a thousand beds but as of Friday just 20 were occupied because the military doesn't want to treat any coronavirus patients but instead handle the overflow of other patients.

In New York, the convention center where Hillary Clinton held her election night party in 2016 is opening its doors to COVID-19 patients. A Navy hospital ship, the USNS Comfort, has a thousand beds but as of Friday just 20 were occupied because the military doesn't want to treat any coronavirus patients but instead handle the overflow of other patients.

In Detroit engineers have been busy since Tuesday erecting partitions in the TCF Center, a convention hall where Bernie Sanders held a political rally in early March. They're putting in oxygen tubes, cabling for electricity and computers, and have modified the air conditioning to ensure air doesn't escape outside. "I've been working 15 hour days since this started," said Nick Zager, of the Army Corps of Engineers which is more often called in to help cities devastated by hurricanes or floods. "I've never felt part of a more important mission in my life."

By the weekend they're hoping to have in place 1,000 rooms measuring three by three meters, separated by partitions, over two floors, awaiting future virus patients. There will be 600 beds on the upper floor equipped with oxygen, and 400 on the lower floor without breathing support for patients further along in their recovery. Plus 66 sinks, 49 showers and 23 toilets.

The facility is being financed by the federal government following a request made by the state of Michigan on Sunday. Medical staff and equipment are the responsibility of the local health authority. Army engineers are already pre-planning 20 other sites in Detroit, Grand Rapids and other parts of

Michigan, in case they are needed. "I like to hope for the best and plan for the worst as an engineer," said Zager, a quote often repeated in his corps.

The military is building eight field hospitals in and around New York, Chicago and two other Illinois cities. More sites in Texas and Louisiana are also planned. In California, the state's National Guard has set up a temporary hospital in the desert environs of Indio, with 125 beds. An RV camp hospital has been set up near the beach in Los Angeles to isolate coronavirus patients. And hospitals are themselves expanding their capacity without waiting for public assistance.

In Virginia, just south of the capital Washington, there is a sense of a calm before the storm. The peak of the outbreak in the state isn't set to occur until mid-May, according to modeling by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington. The Mary Washington Hospital in Virginia's Fredericksburg has just set up an emergency room in its parking lot to double its capacity.

When AFP went there on Thursday, there was still no one there. "I hope we never have to use it but there's no indication with a lot of the models that that's going to be the case, unfortunately," Christopher Newman, the hospital's chief medical officer told AFP. The hospital has doubled its number of Intensive Care Unit beds from 38 to 76, and presently has 71 ventilators. What if the surge means capacity is exceeded by a factor of three or four? It would mean transferring patients to other hospitals, said Newman. "My biggest concern with this is staffing," he said.

He has made arrangements with doctors from other specialties and primary care physicians to plug the gap. But, he warned, "if all the health systems are at capacity or actually double capacity in Virginia, it's going to be very difficult to have additional staff to man the field hospitals." New York illustrates the worst case scenario for what the rest of the country may face in April or May. "I asked the president and the military over a week ago for 1,000 nurses, 150 doctors, 300 respiratory therapists," Mayor Bill de Blasio told CNN on Friday. "I don't have anything yet." — AFP

## New 4,000-bed field hospital opens in London

LONDON: Britain on Friday opened a new 4,000-bed temporary hospital to treat the most seriously ill coronavirus patients, as day-on-day deaths surged to a new record and royal officials said Queen Elizabeth II would make a rare crisis address to the nation. Heir to the throne Prince Charles opened the state-run National Health Service (NHS) Nightingale Hospital, which has been built at London's ExCeL conference venue in just nine days. The 71-year-old prince officially launched the facility via videolink from Scotland, where he has been in self-isolation after testing positive for COVID-19.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, 55, who has also tested positive, said he would remain at home in quarantine because he still had a temperature. Charles and Johnson are among 38,168 confirmed coronavirus cases across Britain. Numbers increased by 4,450 in the 24 hours to 0800 GMT on Friday, according to the health ministry. There was also a third consecutive day of record deaths from confirmed hospital cases - 684 - taking the overall toll to 3,605 as of 1600 GMT on Thursday.

Two NHS nurses and two health-care assistants were among the fatalities in the last 24 hours, Health Secretary Matt Hancock, who has also tested positive for COVID-19, told a daily briefing. Chief Nursing Officer for England Ruth May added: "I worry that there's going to be more. I want to honor them today and recognize their service." The announcement of the new figures coincided with news the queen would make a rare special broadcast to Britain and the Commonwealth at 1900 GMT on Sunday.

The queen, 93, has made only three other special addresses in her 68-year reign: after her mother's death in 2002; before Diana, Princess of Wales' funeral in 1997; and during the first Gulf War in 1991. She has been with her 98-year-old husband Prince Philip at Windsor, west of London, since March 19 as a precaution but palace officials have said the couple were in "good health".

The NHS Nightingale Hospital is named after the trailblazing 19th-century nurse Florence Nightingale, who is seen as one of the founders of modern nursing. — AFP

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## Lifestyle | Features



Workers sell food and household items from their ice cream van to local residents at a supported housing estate in west Belfast after they turned their van into a mobile mini-market selling essential items to residents who are trapped at home by the coronavirus outbreak.—AFP photos

## Cone-a-virus: Ice cream van delivers for Belfast's vulnerable

Ice cream vans are normally a common sight on Britain's residential streets and in parks when warmer days arrive in the spring and summer months. But with the country in lockdown because of the coronavirus, there are no customers to buy their cones, ice lollies and choc-ices. In Belfast, however, at least one van is still operating — bringing essential supplies to the elderly and vulnerable forced to stay at home. "When we had seen that the current situation was starting to arise, we knew that there would be problems for some families and elderly who cannot get access to food," said Steven Pollock, of Greater Shankill Action for Community Transformation group.

The group asked an ice cream van owner to carry supplies to under-served areas with at-risk residents in self-isolation to avoid infection. "The community are totally over the moon with it," Pollock told AFP. "They're just concerned about shops and going out in general." "It gives them a bit more peace of mind that

it's basically on their doorstep so they're not leaving anything to chance."

## Inside scoop

Parked in west Belfast on Wednesday, two workers in rubber gloves and face masks sold toilet roll, bread, milk and eggs through the hatch. For the duration of the coronavirus crisis, whipped ice creams are off the menu on the side of the van as its fridges are stocked with essential foodstuffs. Drivers still play the cheerful music, which in normal times is the sign for children to pester their parents for a sweet treat. This year it lets the elderly and vulnerable know they will not go without potatoes, cornflakes and even hand sanitizer — essentials needed to wait out the pandemic in safety.

Some 30 people who tested positive for coronavirus have died so far in British-run Northern Ireland. The province has 689 confirmed cases, according to Public Health Agency (PHA) figures released

Wednesday. To stem the virus spreading further, the British government has advised the elderly and vulnerable to self-isolate. "The critical thing we must do is stop the disease spreading between households," Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who is himself recovering from COVID-19, said last week.

## Surviving isolation

For the elderly and vulnerable without a support network that can create issues. Each trip to the shop becomes a gamble. "They say it's quite handy, especially for the older people and people with disabilities and health problems — they don't have to travel too far," said 21-year-old van worker Kyle Milligan. Those on low incomes are also forced to make more frequent trips as they cannot "stockpile" like others have done, stripping supermarket shelves.

Across Northern Ireland, some 40,000 pensioners live in poverty, according to a 2018 report from charity

the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. "A lot of elderly people, or people who might not have as much, are only operating on a weekly or day-to-day basis," Pollock said. On Wednesday, Northern Ireland health minister Robin Swann estimated that under a "worst case scenario" 3,000 may die across the province over a 20-week epidemic.

If the crisis lasts that long, Pollock is prepared to continue and expand the project to serve other areas of Northern Ireland with more vans. "We have been looking at ways that are long term and sustainable answers to this, so that it's not just a quick reactionary solution," said Pollock. "We're starting to see that people want it replicated throughout the country."—AFP

Bill Withers,  
soul icon behind 'Lean  
On Me,' dies at 81

Bill Withers, the legendary performer who delivered timeless hits like "Ain't No Sunshine" with silky yet funkified vocals and came to define 1970s soul, has died. He was 81 years old. The Grammy-winning artist behind the beloved "Lean on Me" succumbed to heart complications, according to his family, which said it was "devastated" over the loss. "A solitary man with a heart driven to connect to the world at large, with his poetry and music, he spoke honestly to people and connected them to each other," they said. "In this difficult time, we pray his music offers comfort and entertainment as fans hold tight to loved ones."

The artist's recording career lasted just 14 years — he released his final album in 1985 — but his hits that melded gritty southern blues with smooth R&B have endured for decades as global classics, including "Lovely Day" and "Just the Two of Us." The youngest of six, Withers was born on July 4, 1938 during the final years of the Great Depression in Slab Fork, West Virginia, and grew up in a segregated coal mining region. As a child he struggled with a stutter, and in his teenage years enlisted in the US Navy and then worked as an aircraft mechanic. It wasn't until his mid-30s that Withers began recording music. "I can't play the guitar or the piano, but I made a career out of writing songs on guitars and piano," the artist told The New York Times in 2015. "I never learned music. I just did it."



In this file photo taken on April 18, 2015, Soul singer Bill Withers attends the 30th Annual Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony in Cleveland, Ohio.—AFP

Withers moved to Los Angeles in 1967 and self-financed demos, releasing in 1971 his debut studio album "Just As I Am," which was produced by the influential Booker T. Jones. Its single "Ain't No Sunshine" is now named among Rolling Stone's greatest songs of all time. But the track that became an indelible smash came out on the B-side — the artists and repertoire (A&R) promoters at Withers' label didn't think much of it. "The disc jockeys, god bless 'em, turned it over, and that's how I got started," Withers told NPR in 2015. "I call A&R 'antagonistic & redundant,' and that's why — because they make those genius decisions like that."

## 'Our Everyman'

Rolling Stone dubbed Withers' second album "Still Bill" — which included the now-standards "Lean on Me" and "Use Me" — a "stone-cold masterpiece." Withers based "Lean on Me" — a wildly popular ode to friendship that soundtracked the presidential inaugurations of Barack Obama and Bill Clinton — on his West Virginia childhood, inspired by selfless neighbors in cash-strapped times. An ardent crusader for creative freedom, his disdain for labels was no secret. "Early on, I had a manager for a couple of months, and it felt like getting a gasoline enema," he told Rolling Stone. "Nobody had my interest at heart. I felt like a pawn. I like being my own man." He put out eight studio albums, and entered de-facto retirement in 1985 after releasing his final studio work, "Watching You Watching Me."

But his legacy continued to grow well after he left the industry, with many artists including A-listers like Mick Jagger, Aretha Franklin and Paul McCartney covering his songs. Withers also found love from hip hop artists eager to let samples of his hits power their raps, including Jay-Z, Tupac Shakur and Blackstreet, who with Dr. Dre and Queen Pen revived "Grandma's Hands" for the 1990s hit "No Diggity." "I feel very flattered that my songs have become part of the American landscape," the artist, who kept a low profile as he aged, told Billboard in 2005.—AFP



This handout image provided by the National Orchestra of France (Orchestre National de France) shows an image grab from a video posted on the internet in which musicians of the National Orchestra of France are seen in split-screen as they perform Maurice Ravel's "Bolero", each from their home, during a strict lockdown in France.—AFP

## French orchestra plays on through virus confinement

A French orchestra has found a way around the coronavirus lockdown to record a 51-instrument rendition of Ravel's Bolero. One by one. Alone in their kitchens, lounges or dining rooms, individual Orchestre national de France (ONF) musicians played as their mobile phones recorded their parts in Maurice Ravel's thrilling orchestral score. Then the magic: a technician jigsawed the bits together into a video mosaic to create a near flawless, combined performance of woodwinds, brass, percussion and strings.

"I would never have imagined synchronizing the sound of instruments not playing together," said Dimitri Scapolan, a Radio France video editor in charge of the project. The ONF is one of two orchestras of Radio France. "When I overlapped all the pieces recorded by the cellphones on my computer, to my great astonishment, everyone was in perfect harmony," he told AFP. "All I had to do was to adjust the levels a bit and add some resonance — it mixed itself. It was a pleasure."

## Condensed version

This unusual rendition of Bolero, one of the world's best-known pieces of classical music, had been reworked by conductor Didier Benetti into a condensed four-minute version. The original work is about 15 minutes long and written for 80 musicians. The ONF clip has been viewed more than a million times on YouTube since it was uploaded on March 29 — 12 days into France's campaign of home confinement to brake the coronavirus pandemic. It can be seen here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=117&v=Sj4pE\\_bgrQI&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=117&v=Sj4pE_bgrQI&feature=emb_logo)

The video begins with the artists introducing themselves one by one. The music starts with instruments being played on three split screens, then four, and more and more as the piece crescendos. "At the end, when we have all 51 musicians, I amused myself by recreating the positioning of the orchestra on the screen," said Scapolan. "It highlights Ravel's orchestration and how this music works."

## 'A feeling of union'

For the participants, it was a chance to escape their own confinement, at least mentally, but also to help boost the spirits of others. "It provides a feeling of union" in a time of confinement, said violinist David Riviere, who recorded his part while listening to the piece through headphones. "It is a virtual reunion; we're gathered on the 'Cloud' but we have our colleagues in mind while playing."

For Riviere it was also a way to spread joy, "something universal in this particularly difficult time" which has seen the ONF cancel all concerts. "It is awful to not be working," said Michel Orier, music director at Radio France. "But with this moving video, we wanted to say to the public: 'We are still there for you.'" The Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra had done a similar recording with Beethoven's Ode to Joy, and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra with Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring — each bringing together some 20 musicians.—AFP

'Tiger King': True-crime tale of  
'Joe Exotic' grips shut-in nation

Amid a constant swirl of grim coronavirus news, the surreal tale of a gay, mullet-wearing private zookeeper who calls himself "Joe Exotic" — now in prison for murder-for-hire — has captivated a nation stuck on the couch. "Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness" — featuring a menagerie of big cats, wacky employees and misfit lovers —



This undated photo courtesy of Netflix shows Joseph "Joe Exotic" Maldonado-Passage with one of his tigers.—AFP

is part "Animal Planet" and part "Breaking Bad." And it's all true.

With the vast majority of Americans ordered to stay at home to curb the spread of the deadly virus, the Netflix true-crime series has become a must-see binge-watch for the masses. The seven-part documentary, which premiered on March 20 and tops Netflix's US trending list, depicts the tumultuous world of 57-year-old cat-loving Joseph Maldonado-Passage.

He made a small fortune on his questionable private zoo — and then lost it all in a maelstrom of jealous feuds, mysterious fires, failed political campaigns and convoluted murder plots. "Tiger King" begins and ends at a prison in rural Oklahoma, where Joe Exotic was serving his 22-year sentence until he was transferred to a federal facility in Texas last week. But the story of how he got there — with one bizarre, shocking turn and one sordid scheme after another, all caught on cameras originally aimed at exposing animal abuse — has turned Joe into something of a national anti-hero.



The club has seen an enthusiastic response to their online shows. — Picture via Facebook/The Stand

Edinburgh comedy club goes  
online to beat lockdown

When the British government ordered a three-week public lockdown to reduce the spread of coronavirus, Anthony Dorman knew his Edinburgh comedy club was in danger of shutting for good. The 160-seater basement venue, The Stand, operates on tight profit margins from ticket sales at the door and drinks from the bar. Without customers, the Edinburgh institution faced certain closure. But to stay open, management decided to test out a

live-streamed show with an option for the audience to make donations. Demand for tickets at The Stand is usually high but Dorman was unprepared for the online response, as more than 100,000 people logged on to watch the first two shows on YouTube. "The first show reached more than 34,000 viewers and we received more than 2,000 donations," he told AFP.—AFP

Lifestyle | Features



A file handout picture shows Saudi actor Nasser al-Gasabi (left) during the filming of a scene of the TV drama series Al-Assouf (Winds of Change) in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates.—AFP photos



In this file photo Syrian actress Nadine Tahseen Beck is seen during the filming of the serial drama "Fouda" or "Chaos" in the al-Qasaa area near the capital Damascus's Jobar district.



A file handout picture shows actors on the set of the prime-time series "Black Crows" at the group studios in Lebanon.

# Cut! Coronavirus pegs back Ramadan soaps

Missing scenes, unfinished episodes and sets sanitized against coronavirus — much-loved Ramadan television soaps are struggling to keep the cameras rolling just weeks before the Islamic holy month. Many countries in the Middle East have imposed tough restrictions to curb the spread of the pandemic, forcing studios to shut down temporarily and others to work under strict rules. At the same time, residents have been asked to stay off the streets and work from home, unleashing a potentially huge captive television audience and pressuring networks to provide a constant supply of content.

"We have four unfinished Ramadan TV series we were shooting in Lebanon, and another one in Syria. All are on hold now," the head of acquisitions at a

Dubai-based network told AFP. "The countdown has begun. We need as much content as possible before Ramadan. If we can't have our shows ready, we'll look at buying from outside production houses even if it means lower quality," he said, requesting anonymity. Up to 90 percent of people across the Middle East watch traditional television, according to US research firm Frost & Sullivan and the Pan Arab Research Center at Northwestern University in Qatar.

Viewing spikes and advertising prices skyrocket during Ramadan, set to start this year in the third week of April, as families settle down with soap operas after breaking their fast at sunset with the iftar meal, or with suhoor in the pre-dawn hours. Gangster wars in rural villages, social taboos, historical sagas, love, cheating,

mystery and comedy all form part of the daily diet on pan-Arab and local channels. They are already locked in a fierce battle for viewers with online platforms such as Netflix and local competitor Starz Play.

### Don't laugh

For Jamal Sinan, owner of Eagles Films Production, it's a race against time to get the cameras rolling again for his company's three Ramadan series in Lebanon. "We are committed to following the rules while we look for a specific way to continue working, like doing the job with fewer cameramen... But we don't know when this can happen," he told AFP. "Only circumstances will decide how ready we will be." In one of the series, Lebanese star Cyrine Abdel Nour plays the leading role — a tailor who falls in love with the owner of a fashion house.

Wearing a white mask and blue gloves, the actress closed her eyes and stood still while she was sprayed from head to toe with sanitizer before entering a house in a Lebanese village where one of the last scenes was being filmed before shutting down. Abdel Nour posted a video of the incident on her Instagram account, which has 8.9 million followers. "Please don't laugh at me," she wrote in the caption. "This is how we used to film. May God end this phase... so we can go back to filming." While filming has shut down in countries including Lebanon and Kuwait, cameras have kept rolling in other places such as the United Arab Emirates, but under strict rules limiting the number of cameramen and non-essential crew.

### I'll really need that

Pan-Arab leading broadcaster MBC has been "constantly sanitizing the studios and places of filming", according to its spokesman Mazen Hayek. "There are mobile (medical) emergency units outside our HQs," he added. In Egypt, a country with a population of almost 100 million, television is considered a golden goose, and no official order to close studios has been issued. But Ashraf Zaki, head of the actors' syndicate, said "80 percent of filming has stopped anyway", and a handful of actors have petitioned online for an official order to stop work, accusing the authorities of

taking risks.

The worldwide death toll from the novel coronavirus rose to more than 48,000 this week, and the measures taken to stop the spread have hit the whole of the entertainment industry. Scores of events have



In this file photo taken on May 14, 2017, Syrian actor Rashid Assaf (left) is seen on the filming set of television series "Tawq al-Banat" in the village of Yaafur, some 20 kms (12 miles) west of the capital Damascus.

been postponed and cinemas have closed their doors in many countries, with more than three billion people confined to their homes. Syrian producer Diana Jabbour said her company stopped filming even before the authorities demanded it. "We will not gamble with the health of anybody working with us, from the smallest technician to the greatest actor," she told AFP. But for fans like 60-year-old Hayam Ali, who hasn't left her home in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, for three weeks for fear of catching the disease, not having plenty of soap operas to watch during Ramadan would be a real blow. "Ramadan is prayers, good food, family gatherings and TV. But I haven't seen anyone in weeks and I don't think I will soon. The TV series better be good enough. I'll really need that," she said.—AFP



This file photo shows billboards for Ramadan TV series in the streets of the Egyptian capital Cairo.

## How to stop the virus making us all fatter

The coronavirus has shaken the world like nothing else. But beyond the terrible toll of death, economic devastation and fear, the virus is likely to leave another lasting mark. It is going to make us all fatter. "I don't know if we are going to come out of this experience stronger, but we will have gotten fatter," warned nutritionist Beatrice de Reynal, who said that was only one thing to do — eat less. "It is going to happen to us all, even if we try to exercise," said the similarly fatalistic Julian Mercier, a French sports, health and cooking coach.

With more than a quarter of humanity shut up at home or under lockdown, and with many worried they will get the virus next, the temptation to comfort eat was hard to resist. "I am the first to turn to chocolate rather than to an apple," Mercier admitted. "And that is what risks being our undoing." The arithmetic of the situation is hard to argue with. By doing little or none of the physical activity we normally do, an adult is likely to burn off up to 400 fewer calories a day, said dietician Jennifer Aubert. Which is why we have to reduce our portions and move as much as we can — as long as it is not to the fridge and back. Other experts point to people who have panic-bought a cupboard full of fresh food, finding themselves duty-bound to eat their way through it.

### Slipping into over-eating

Being alone and coping with the stress of the situation, as well as worries about whether they will have a job to go back to, can tip people into over-eating, the British Nutrition Foundation warned. "With concerns about the availability of food, eating well and staying healthy alongside all the other stresses of the coronavirus outbreak is a challenge," it admitted. "Food can be a comfort and it's easy to overeat when spending so much time at home, especially if you like to cook in order to pass the time."

But it is advising people to embrace the lockdown to learn to "put together healthy meals" which "can be a

source of enjoyment and help your well-being". "Canned or frozen ingredients can be just as nutritious as fresh," it added. Not everyone cooks, however, as Pascale Hebel, of the French CREDOC research institute said, and some may not have the wherewithal to cook. Which can lead to a heavy reliance on fatty and salty ready-meals and tinned food. Others warned against using food as a way of soothing children forbidden from going outside to play with their friends.

"To avoid problems it is easy to make spaghetti bolognese that everyone likes rather than to fight to make them eat spinach," Mercier said. But that would be a mistake. Experts were unanimous that cooking for yourself and structuring your day with regular meals and physical activity, were vital if we are to come out of this in decent shape.

### Stay calm and cook

It can even be possible to lose weight, said Aubert, because "we actually have more time to do sport at home". And with hashtags like #homemadefood proliferating on social media as users show off dishes and compare recipes, it could also be the chance to teach a whole new generation how to cook. British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver certainly thinks so and has been doing his bit with a nightly show based on "store cupboard and freezer faves" called "Keep Cooking And Carry On". It includes dishes fast but healthy dishes such as "Cornershop Curry" and "Quick green pasta".

"I understand that it is easy to fall into watching the television, or lying around reading and snacking. I am the first to do it," his French opposite number Cyril Lignac told AFP. "But this period is a great chance to teach children and teenagers how to cook simple dishes. And when I am at home I tend to cook with less fat and sugar."—AFP

## Pie in the sky: Aussie plane delivers pizza to locked-down outback

Pizza and beer are being delivered by plane to remote ranches in the Australian outback in an attempt to bring a slice of cheer to those in extreme isolation under the virus lockdown. The Dunmarra Wayside Inn, a usually bustling roadside diner in Australia's Northern Territory, used a small fixed-wing aircraft for a trial run of what it hopes will become a weekly flying takeaway service to far-flung cattle stations. "The station that we did send them to absolutely loved them, so much that they ate them for breakfast the next morning," Ben Anderson, the inn's manager and pizza cook, told AFP on Friday.

The business had tried to keep the service under wraps until it was certain the plane deliveries would work. "We've put in a massive pizza oven, which we kept extremely secret," Anderson said. But news of the tasty drop-off proved too hot to handle, and on Friday he was fielding calls from eager reporters — with one radio station asking if he could deliver to their studio in Perth, over 3,000 kilometers (1,800 miles) away. "That's probably a bit out of our range," he said. At the moment, Anderson and his team are only planning to fly to properties within 100 kilometers.

### 'Friendly gesture'

The idea was cooked up as coronavirus travel restrictions bit into the outback's peak tourist season, stopping the usual stream of caravans and months of booked-out rooms. Regional travel in the Northern Territory remains strictly controlled, with large swathes in lockdown over fears for remote indigenous communities who experts warn could be particularly susceptible to an outbreak, due to higher rates of chronic illness.

The idea to fly pizzas and other supplies to remote properties was more about supporting those in the area than simply a business venture, the inn's owner Gary Frost told national broadcaster ABC. "We're just doing it as a friendly gesture to try and help people out," he said. Under the restrictions, even fly-in, fly-out deliveries have to be left at the door for residents to pick up. "I said to the boss, maybe we should just get parachutes and drop them out the sky but you never know where they're gonna end up," Anderson said.—AFP

## 'Corona cake' spreading fast in Gaza

As he watched the world trying to raise awareness about the new coronavirus and convince people to stay at home, Palestinian baker Eyad Abu Rezzaq cooked up an idea. The head of the Al-Nada bakery in Khan Yunis in southern Gaza has created a 'corona cake' depicting a woman wearing a blue face mask, aiming to remind people of the importance of social distancing. He first posted the design on social media and now dozens of people are ordering them each day in the impoverished Palestinian enclave, he said.

"Straight away it got great interest, customers starting saying 'I want that cake'," Abu Rezzaq told AFP. "Every day our clients' demand for the mask cake is increasing." He stressed he was not belittling the risk of the deadly disease which has killed more than 50,000 people but trying to keep spirits up while promoting awareness. So far Gaza has 12 confirmed cases of COVID-19, all of whom are in isolation, according to health authorities in the Hamas-run strip. Like much of the world, authorities have put in place strict social distancing rules to try to prevent contagion but have not yet closed all non-essential businesses. The staff making the cakes are wearing protective clothing, Abu Rezzaq pointed out.—AFP



A Palestinian baker finishes a cake, that portrays a woman wearing a face mask, at his shop in Khan Yunis.





Worshippers circumambulate the sacred Kaaba in Makkah's Grand Mosque on Friday. Saudi Arabia on April 2 extended curfew restrictions on Islam's two holiest cities to 24 hours to stem the spread of coronavirus as the number of deaths from the disease rose to 21. — AFP

## Tunisia 'robocop' enforces lockdown

**TUNIS:** Tunisia's interior ministry has deployed a police robot to patrol the streets of the capital and enforce a lockdown imposed last month as the country battles the spread of coronavirus. Known as PGuard, the 'robocop' is remotely operated and equipped with infrared and thermal imaging cameras, in addition to a sound and light alarm system. In images and a soundtrack posted on the interior ministry's website last month, PGuard calls out to suspected violators of the lockdown: "What are you doing? Show me your ID. You don't know there's a lockdown?"

Tunisia has been under night-time curfew since March 17 and authorities imposed stricter lockdown

orders from March 22. Since March 2, 14 people have died from coronavirus in Tunisia where 455 confirmed cases have tested positive for the disease. The robot's Tunisian creator Anis Sahbani told AFP the machine was first produced in 2015 essentially to carry out security patrols and it also operates autonomously through artificial intelligence.

The robot, built by Sahbani's Enova Robotics firm, costs between €100,000-130,000 (\$100,000-\$140,000) and has been selling mostly overseas to companies for security uses. A number of the robots have been donated to the interior ministry. Based in the eastern city of Sousse, the company is now planning to deploy another robot in a Tunis hospital

to help coronavirus patients communicate with relatives.

And a third one is being produced and should be operational by the end of April in hospitals as part of a process to determine which patients are likely infected with COVID-19. The 'robocop' deployed in

Tunis has been a hit on social media with users posting footage of the machine in action in several parts of the capital. It can be heard voicing pre-recorded messages calling on citizens to "respect the law... and stay at home to limit the spread (of the virus) and safeguard human lives". — AFP

## First coronavirus death in...

Continued from Page 1

where the global pandemic began, as Americans were warned to wear masks amid fears the disease can be spread by breathing. The advice came as America logged another huge rise in its death toll - almost 1,500 in one day - and as new infections continued unabated. Since COVID-19 emerged late last year, around 1.1 million people have fallen ill. Almost 60,000 people have died.

China, which appears to be over the worst of its outbreak, yesterday held a national day of mourning for its dead - well over 3,000 people have died since the virus emerged there late last year. Cars, trains and ships sounded their horns, and air-raid sirens wailed, as flags were flown at half-staff from 10 am (0200 GMT).

While there are signs of normality returning in some parts of China as movement restrictions are eased, large swathes of the world remain in dire straits. Europe accounts for the lion's share of the dead, with Italy and Spain bearing the brunt. But the situation is rapidly deteriorating in the United States, and President Donald Trump's administration on Friday suggested widespread use of simple masks or scarves might help stem the rocketing infection rate.

"It's going to be really a voluntary thing," Trump said. "You don't have to do it and I'm choosing not to do it, but some people may want to do it and that's okay." Anthony Fauci, head of infectious diseases at the National Institutes of Health, cited "recent information that the virus can actually be spread even when people just speak as opposed to coughing and sneezing."

Fauci's comments come after the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) sent a letter to the White House on April 1 that summarized recent research on the subject. It said that though the research isn't yet conclusive, "the results of available studies are consistent with aerosolization of virus from normal breathing." Until now, US health agencies have said that the primary pathway of transmission is respiratory droplets, about one millimeter in diameter, expelled by sick people when they sneeze or cough.

These quickly fall to the ground around a meter away. But if the virus can be suspended in the ultra-fine mist we expel when we exhale, in other words an aerosol, it becomes much harder to prevent its spread, which in turn is an argument in favor of everyone covering their faces.

A recent NIH funded study published in the New England Journal of Medicine found that the SARS-CoV-2 virus could become an aerosol and remain airborne for up to three hours. This triggered a debate even as critics said the findings were overblown because the team behind the study used a medical device called a nebulizer to deliberately create a viral mist and argued that would not occur naturally.

The NAS letter pointed to preliminary research by the University of Nebraska Medical Center that found the genetic code of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, its RNA, were found in hard to reach areas of patients' isolation rooms. The NAS sci-

entists also pointed to two other studies - both not yet peer reviewed - from Hong Kong and from mainland China.

The Hong Kong researchers collected viral samples from patients with the coronavirus and other viral respiratory illnesses, and gave some of the patients face masks. The masks reduced the detection of both droplets and aerosols for coronavirus patients. The Chinese paper on the other hand raised concerns that personal protective gear used by healthcare workers could itself be a source of airborne virus.

The team studied hospitals in Wuhan and found that there were two major areas where the virus was aerosolized: The bathrooms of patients, and rooms where medical staff removed their protective gear. This may be because doffing protective gear causes the particles to get re-suspended in the air. Even if these particles are not of breathable size, they could settle on people's hands and bodies, the NAS panel said.

So far, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been more cautious on the airborne threat. In an analysis published on March 29, it wrote that aerosol transmission was only known to occur during particular medical treatments that required assisted breathing. On the recent preliminary research, such as the University of Nebraska's paper, the WHO cautioned that the detection of the virus' genetic code in patient's rooms did not necessarily amount to viable amounts of the pathogen that could be transmitted onward.

The World Health Organization has been more cautious, saying the airborne threat was only known to occur during certain medical treatments. The US recommendation will likely worsen an already severe shortage of masks in the United States and Europe, which both rely heavily on imports from China. Officials in New York, the worst affected part of the US, began advising people to wear masks some days ago, and there were signs on the streets that the advice was being heeded.

Around 278,000 Americans have tested positive for the disease, and the infection curve shows no sign of flattening, despite nine in 10 citizens living under some sort of lockdown. Field hospitals are sprouting in convention centers, sports arenas and parking lots all over the country as states gird for an expected influx of patients.

Europe's awful death toll hit 40,000 on Friday, with Spain reporting more than 900 deaths in 24 hours. But there were also signs the peak may have hit on the continent. Hardest-hit Italy recorded 766 new deaths but its infections rose by just four percent, the lowest yet, according to the civil protection service. "It's true that the latest figures, as high as they are, give us a little bit of hope, as the growth in new infections is slower than it was a few days ago," said Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, where strict social distancing measures are credited with curbing the spread.

There was, however, yet another warning over the fate of the less developed world, especially conflict zones or places with large refugee populations. "The worst is yet to come," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, referring to countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen. "The COVID-19 storm is now coming to all these theaters of conflict." The world economy has been pummeled by the virus and associated lockdowns, with millions more people signing on for unemployment payments in the US. — Agencies



TUNIS: A Tunisian police robot patrols along Avenue Habib Bourguiba in the center of the capital on April 1, 2020. - AFP

## Kuwait exports oil from joint fields...

Continued from Page 1

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait signed an agreement in December to resume pumping at two major oilfields in the shared neutral zone that had been closed due to a disagreement between the neighbors. The two fields were pumping some 500,000 barrels per day before production was halted, first at Khafji in Oct 2014 and then at Wafra seven months later. Riyadh said at the time that the decision was due to environmental issues. The oil produced in the neutral zone in the border area is shared equally between the two nations.

The announcement comes as Saudi Arabia ramps up supply amid a price war with Russia that has sent oil prices crashing to 18-year lows as demand slides amid the coronavirus pandemic. Kuwait supports Saudi Arabia's invitation for a meeting between OPEC and non-OPEC oil producers, an informal grouping known as OPEC+, to curb global oil supply and halt the oil price rout, Fadhel said. The energy ministry of non-OPEC producer Azerbaijan, meanwhile, said the OPEC+ meeting is planned for April 6 and will be held as a video conference, Russia's RIA news agency reported.

OPEC and its allies are working on a deal for an unprecedented oil production cut equivalent to around 10 percent of worldwide supply in what they expect will be a global effort including the United States, but the White House did not make such a commitment after a Friday meeting with oil companies. While US President Donald Trump pledged help for the industry at the meeting, he made no commitment to take the extraordinary step of persuading US companies to cut output.

In a subsequent phone conference, US Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette told industry executives that the White House is not negotiating with Saudi Arabia or Russia, but it is encouraging them to come together to reach an agreement to cut production, a source who listened to the call said. The oil market has crashed, with prices falling to \$34 a barrel from \$65 at the beginning of the year, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Fuel demand has dropped by

roughly a third, or 30 million barrels per day, as billions of people worldwide restrict their movements.

A global deal to reduce production by as much as 10 million to 15 million barrels per day would require participation from nations that do not exert state control over output, including the United States, now the world's largest producer of crude. Trump said on Thursday he did not make any concessions to Saudi Arabia and Russia, such as agreeing to a US domestic production cut, a move forbidden by US antitrust laws. Some US officials have suggested US production was set for a steep decline anyway because of low prices.

OPEC producers are waiting to see if the United States commits to any efforts to stabilize the markets, two OPEC sources said. They said a deal must include producers from outside OPEC+, an alliance which includes OPEC members, Russia and other producers, but excludes oil nations such as the United States, Canada, Norway and Brazil. "The US needs to contribute from shale oil," an OPEC source said. Russia has long expressed frustration that its joint cuts with OPEC were only lending support to higher-cost US shale producers.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that his country was ready to cut production along with OPEC and the United States, while still blaming Saudi Arabia for the market's collapse. Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Abdulaziz bin Salman responded, telling state media that it was not Saudi Arabia that refused to extend a production-cut deal that would have reined in output in early March.

Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak told Russian state media that he understands the United States has legal restrictions on output cuts, but it should still be flexible. Brouillette, in his call with the industry, did not mention the possibility of US industry production cuts, the source who listened to the call said. Jason Kenney, the premier of Alberta, Canada's primary oil-producing province, said on Friday that the province would join the Monday OPEC call.

The Norwegian oil and energy ministry declined to comment on Friday on whether Western Europe's largest producer could cut output to support prices. The International Energy Agency warned on Friday that a cut of 10 million barrels per day would not be enough to counter the huge fall in oil demand. Even with such a cut, inventories would increase by 15 million barrels per day in the second quarter, said Fatih Birol, the head of the agency. — Agencies



Stars


Daily SuDoku								
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medium


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

very hard


STAR TRACK

**Aries (March 21-April 19)**  
 Today isn't a day for meditation, Aries. The planetary energies are asking you to step outside of yourself and get back into the world again! You've been doing an awful lot of thinking about your image recently, and now you're going to have to test out how the "new and improved" you operates in your daily life. You can expect some pleasant feedback and truly lasting changes!


**Libra (September 23-October 22)**  
 More than ever before, you'll feel as though it's time to take matters into your own hands and build your own career future. You're fed up with living on hope and putting off your happiness until tomorrow. Your determination will be so strong that you could even surprise yourself. Tomorrow you'll refine your approach and make it more concrete. Today is the first day of a new life for you, Libra.

**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**  
 If you have grievances about your love life, Taurus, today is the day to speak up. Indeed, today requires only total honesty and forthrightness in all areas. You can expect to confront "the other," whether it's your mate or co-worker, on the basis of truth and righteousness. Rest assured you'll command his or her attention! Be careful that the weight of your words doesn't surpass that of your thoughts.


**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**  
 This is the ideal moment to address once and for all the questions that have been on your mind for the last three weeks, Scorpio. Pay particular attention to questions that touch on your sentimental side. If you're currently involved in unsatisfactory relationships, don't be afraid to leave them behind. And if you're fretting about a request you made that has yet to be answered, let it go. No response is forthcoming.


**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**  
 Are you thinking of switching careers or traveling to the other side of the world, Gemini? Or perhaps you just want to pull a "Greta Garbo" and stay at home alone with the shades drawn tight. A series of small incidents at work is likely to inspire you with the most outlandish of ideas. It might just be that you sense your inner need for a change of scene.


**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**  
 Like your compatriots, Sagittarius, something is coming to an end concerning the lack of confidence you have in yourself. You have been hesitant to stand in the spotlight for quite a while now, feeling you aren't quite ready. Well, no more excuses! Ready or not, you're going to have to push forward. The only thing you risk losing is your pride, and that, Sagittarius, is your most resilient asset.


**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**  
 You're likely to find people somewhat irritating today, Cancer. It's as though nothing is good enough, and nobody seems to know exactly what he or she wants. You'll reign supreme within this maze of overt conflict and dissatisfaction. You might even be asked to step in and restore order. If the conflict is domestic, go ahead. But tread carefully if you're asked to be the sheriff at the office!

**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**  
 It's possible that the last few weeks have allowed you to gain a little clarity on certain questions you may have about your vocation, Capricorn. You might even be a little clearer about your feelings concerning what your destiny might be. The planetary energy makes this a good time to stop thinking about such questions and let your life take over. You are well prepared for this kind of thing!

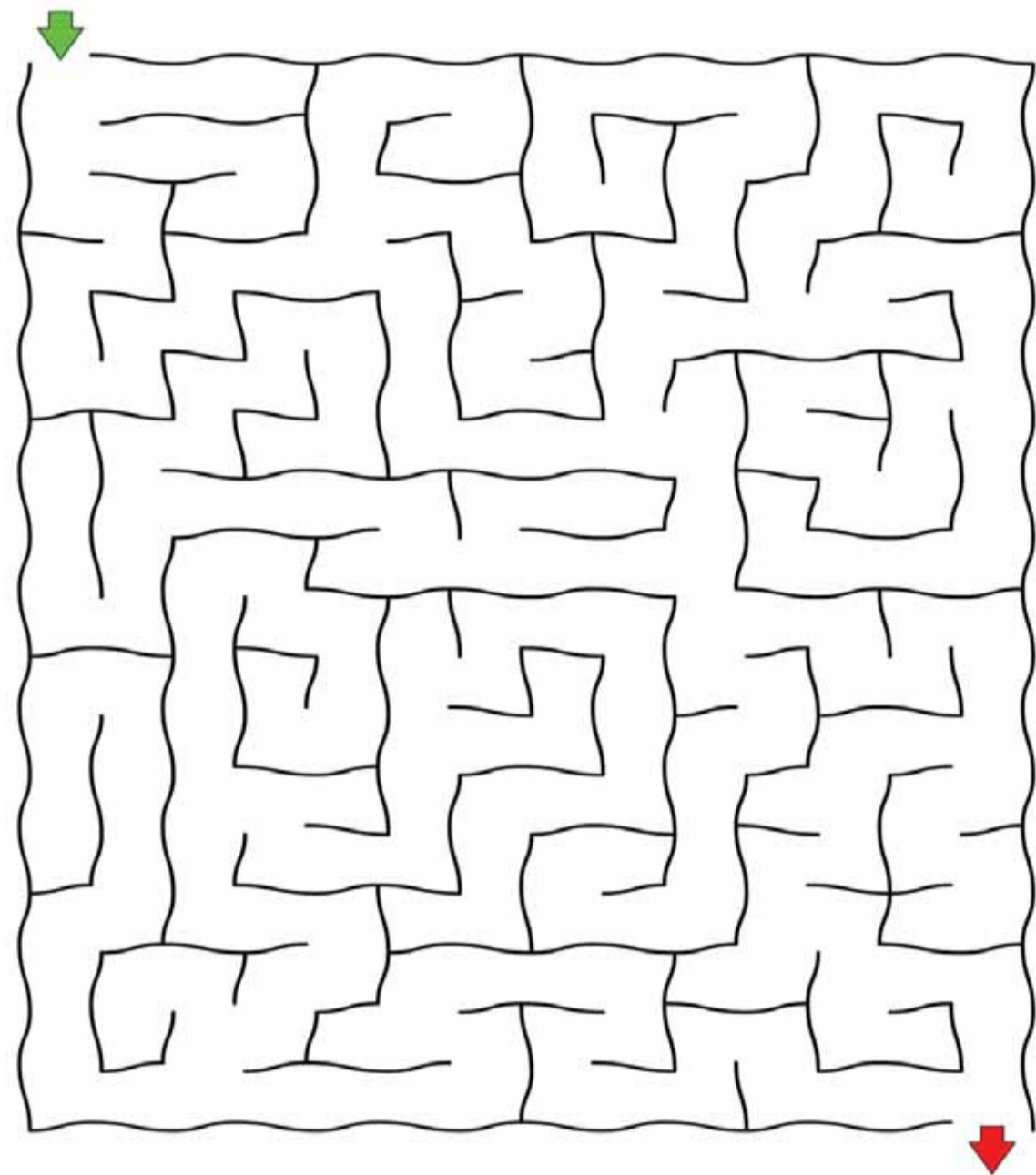
**Leo (July 23-August 22)**  
 When you woke up this morning, you may have felt an oppressive mood hanging in the air. Unfortunately, that haze of misunderstanding and conflict is likely to last all day. However, it makes this an ideal time to speak up about anything that's bothering you! Don't be shy about going on the warpath today. If you don't, Leo, you're likely to be the target of a surprise attack.

**Aquarius (January 20- February 18)**  
 These past three weeks were rather good for your equilibrium, Aquarius. It was just a matter of getting a bit more involved in life than is usual for you, and showing what you're capable of. It's likely you had a mixture of successes and setbacks, but on the whole, improvements have been steady. You might have noticed that something about you needed improvement, but isn't that true for everyone?

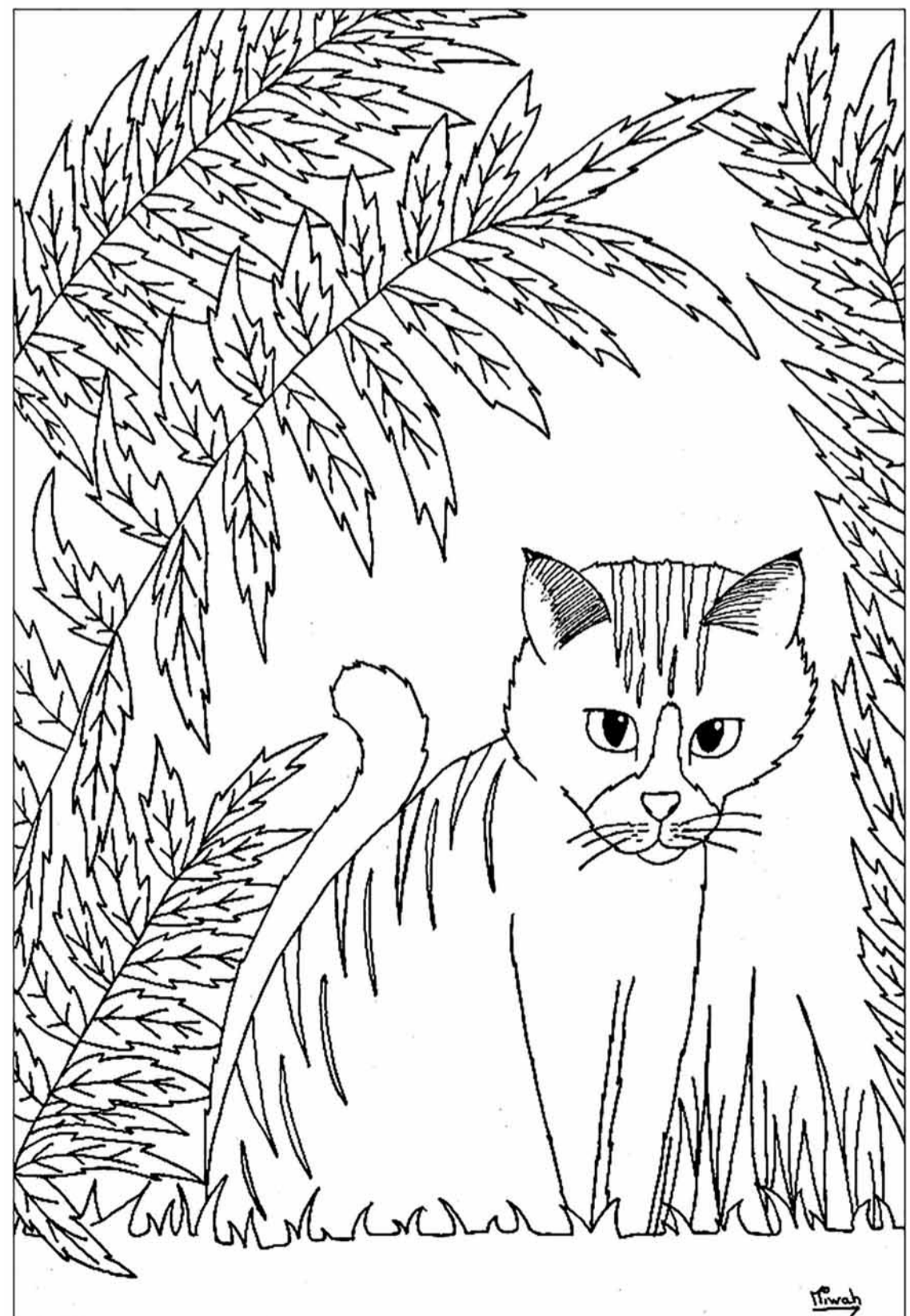
**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**  
 The mood you're in today is the stuff of which memorable encounters are made. You'll be wary at first, perhaps even somewhat hostile, to anyone who dares intrude on your freedom. Then suddenly you'll realize that this person is someone special, intriguing, and definitely out of the ordinary. Finally, Virgo, you'll realize that the qualities he or she offers just happen to be those you need the most right now.

**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**  
 It isn't always pleasant to have to question oneself, Pisces, but this is the main objective of today's planetary energies - to launch you into new adventures. So take advantage of the configuration to look inside and find the source of some of your setbacks. This isn't an easy exercise, to be sure, but it will do you an enormous amount of good. Just be honest with yourself.

Find the way




Color It



Crossword

**VOLCANOES**



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**ACROSS**

3. layer of the earth under the crust
6. planet with the largest known volcano
7. center of the earth
9. passage followed by magma
11. area in the pacific ocean with lots of volcanic activity
13. melted rock inside of the earth
15. crack in the earth's crust where volcanic material escapes

**DOWN**

1. melted rock that comes out of a volcano
2. Roman god for whom volcanoes are named
4. ejection of solid, liquid and gas from a volcano
5. the earth's crust is divided into \_\_\_\_ plates
8. tall column of water and steam erupting from the earth's surface
9. top layer of the earth
10. volcano that is currently inactive but may erupt in the future
12. side of a volcano
14. fine particles of rock dust from an erupting volcano

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## Sports

Photo of the day



LAAX: Hailey Langland performing at the Laax Open 2020 Slopestyle Finals in Laax, Switzerland. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

NFL could move  
2024 Super Bowl  
due to Mardi Gras

**NEW ORLEANS:** The NFL is considering moving the 2024 Super Bowl out of New Orleans due to potential conflicts with Mardi Gras that emerged with the pending expansion to a 17-game season.

New Orleans, which was awarded Super Bowl LVIII during a meeting in 2018, would not lose the game entirely, but rather have it pushed back a year or two. No decision has been made.

The game is scheduled for Feb. 4, but that date was set with a 16-game NFL schedule. If a week were to be added to the schedule, the game would be played on Feb. 11 — presenting a conflict with Mardi Gras beginning on Feb. 13.

"The New Orleans Host Committee, led by the New Orleans Saints and Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation, has remained in close communication with league officials about the change to a 17-game regular season, as it relates to the city hosting Super Bowl LVIII in 2024," Saints vice president of communications Greg Benschel said in a statement on Friday. "During the bid process in 2018, it was contemplated and discussed the possibility of an extended schedule based on a new CBA. The Bid Committee, the New Orleans Saints and NFL worked together to build in contingencies if a potential conflict with Mardi Gras should affect the Super Bowl date.

"Mutually agreed upon terms during the bid process granted assurances that the NFL and Host Committee would explore all options for still hosting the game in 2024, or, agreeing to host the Super Bowl in a future year when the citywide calendar permits."

The 17-game schedule, per terms of the new collective bargaining agreement, will be installed as the norm sometime between 2021 and 2023.

The NFL has yet to award the 2025 Super Bowl. The other upcoming host cities are Tampa, Fla. (2020 season), Inglewood, Calif. (2021) and Glendale, Ariz. (2022). —Reuters

Joshua's heavyweight title defence  
postponed by coronavirus outbreak

## Khan eyeing career swansong against Pacquiao or Brook

**LONDON:** Anthony Joshua's world heavyweight title defence against mandatory challenger Kubrat Pulev has been officially postponed due to the coronavirus outbreak, promoters Matchroom Sport announced Friday.

The British champion was due to put his WBA, IBF, WBO and IBO belts up for grabs against Bulgarian challenger Pulev at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London on June 20. But the global spread of COVID-19 has put paid to a bout on that date.

"Anthony Joshua's defence of his IBF, WBA, WBO and IBO heavyweight world titles against mandatory challenger Kubrat Pulev scheduled to take place at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium on Saturday June 20 has been postponed," said a Matchroom statement.

"A new date for the event promoted by Matchroom Boxing and 258 Management in association with Top Rank and Epic Sports Entertainment is currently being worked on. "We will announce any updates in due course and continue to explore the possibility of hosting this fight at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium." This is the second time Pulev has missed out on the chance to face Joshua after a shoulder injury forced him out of a world title bout in October 2017.

## FURY PREFERENCE

Earlier on Friday, Eddie Hearn, Joshua's promoter, said his champion's lone contest of 2020 might be with Tyson Fury in a world unification bout if the spread of COVID-19 means he only has time for one bout this year.

A clash with compatriot Fury, the WBC heavyweight champion would be one of the most eagerly anticipated contests in British boxing history. Hearn, while open to the possibility of the Pulev fight being

postponed until the end of July warned any further delay could see a change of plan.

"If it starts kicking on beyond that, you get to a situation where if Joshua is only going to box once this year he'd like it to be against Tyson Fury," Hearn told Sky Sports. Fury is expected to complete his trilogy with Deontay Wilder later in 2020, having dethroned the American in February, but Hearn is hopeful some negotiations could be possible.

"The situation is a little bit out of our hands," he said. "If Bob Arum and Al Haymon (Fury and Wilder's promoters) can talk and make Deontay Wilder wait a little bit we would love to go into that fight next.

"We are contractually bound to face Pulev who is with Bob Arum and there is a deal to be done. A lot depends on Deontay Wilder." Joshua suffered a shock seventh-round defeat by Andy Ruiz Jr at New York's Madison Square Garden in June last year that saw him relinquish several world titles.

But his last bout saw the 30-year-old Joshua avenge that loss and regain his belts with a victory over Ruiz in Saudi Arabia in December.

Meanwhile, former world champion Amir Khan said Friday that he is eager to end his boxing career with a lucrative bout against ring great Manny Pacquiao or in an all-British contest with Kell Brook.

The 33-year-old Khan, who won his last bout with a fourth-round victory over Billy Dib in Saudi Arabia in July, had reportedly been considering retirement, but he is determined to go out with a flourish against high-class opposition.

"I have a couple of fights left in me — one or two at least," said Khan, speaking to promoter Eddie Hearn via Instagram on Friday. "The biggest fights motivate me. When you've made so much money and won world



Anthony Joshua

titles, what's going to motivate you?"

"A Manny Pacquiao fight is huge, wherever it was, then you have Kell Brook, another massive fight in the UK." Khan won an Olympic silver medal at the age of just 17 and as a professional took two light-welterweight titles.

But apart from a 2016 bout with Canelo Alvarez, he has been unable to secure a fight against one of boxing's current global stars such as Floyd Mayweather or Pacquiao.

But any thoughts about when he might next fight

have been put on hold by the coronavirus pandemic, which has led to a state of lockdown in Britain, with boxing one of several major sports worldwide effectively suspended by the spread of COVID-19.

"I want to fight — we just don't know how long the coronavirus is going to last," added Khan. Last week saw Khan offer his 60,000 square feet (5,600 square-metre) wedding venue in his home town of Bolton to Britain's National Health Service amid concerns the surge in the number of coronavirus patients was leading to a shortage of hospital beds. —AFP

Ecclestone to  
be father again  
at age of 89

**LONDON:** Colourful former Formula One boss Bernie Ecclestone is to become a father at the age of 89 with his wife Fabiana Flosi, who is half his age, expecting a son in July, he told The Daily Mail on Friday.

Ecclestone, who revolutionised Formula One as chief executive from 1978 to 2017, has three adult daughters from two previous marriages. "There's nothing that unusual is there?" he told the newspaper from the couple's home in Brazil.

"I haven't had a job for a little while so I have had plenty of time to practise! "I don't see there's any difference between being 89 and 29." Ecclestone said his greatest delight was for his 44-year-old marketing executive wife.

"Yes, she (his wife) is thrilled," he said. "We're not sure what all the fuss is about! "I'm very happy and happy really for my wife, she's been looking forward to this happening for quite a few years so I'm happy she'll have someone after I'm gone."

Ecclestone, who said his daughters were delighted with the news of the family addition, hoped age had improved his parenting skills. "We don't know,



Bernie Ecclestone with his wife Fabiana Flosi.

probably better than before, probably a bit more relaxed!"

The former F1 ringmaster said he was mindful of the dangers posed by the coronavirus pandemic. "You hope it's not going to happen but these things do happen so you just have to cope, what else can you do?" he told the Mail Online.

"You have to hope that the people who are looking after everything have not caught anything themselves. "I'm not too sure we're ever going to get rid of this bloody nonsense, anymore than the flu that happens every year.

"It's just that at the moment this is a little bit more dangerous than what we've been used to but when it settles down I think the world will have changed an awful lot." —AFP

Wickens to make  
IndyCar return  
in virtual race

**TORONTO:** Robert Wickens will be back behind the wheel yesterday for the first time since a near fatal crash two years ago and while it will be a virtual IndyCar race the Canadian sees it is another step towards the real thing.

"I'm just excited to drive something. Last night was the first time I've driven any form of race car since the accident at Pocono Speedway," Wickens told reporters during a conference call on Friday, after getting in his first few practice laps at Barber Motorsport Park.

"Even though it was virtual it still felt pretty good." With the novel coronavirus outbreak forcing a shutdown of global sport it has presented an unexpected opportunity for Wickens, who sustained devastating spinal injuries in the crash, to once again go wheel-to-wheel with his IndyCar Series rivals in the iRacing IndyCar Challenge.

Formula One, NASCAR and IndyCar have all found eager audiences for virtual racing in the absence of the real thing, with drivers, like fans, looking to fill a sporting void. Last week's series opener at a virtual Watkins Glen was won by Sage Karam and attracted more than 400,000 viewers on live streaming. Yet those numbers are expected to jump on Saturday with the Indy Grand Prix of Alabama airing live on NBCSN, using their number one broadcast crew.

The starting grid will feature IndyCar series drivers champion Josef Newgarden, a host of Indianapolis 500 winners including New Zealand's Scott Dixon, Australian Will Power and seven-time NASCAR Cup champion Jimmie Johnson. Yet the driver in the spotlight is likely to be Wickens, who will be testing out a steering wheel with hand brakes and a gear shifter that he hopes will one day allow him to get back into a real IndyCar.

"It's weird it is kind of a mental overload my brain was exploding from figuring out how to use the hand brakes the feeling of it and everything," said Wickens. "It is a lot of work to do in a short amount of time.

"I always knew race simulation was going to be the best way to try all the different hand brake configurations or paddle configurations so this is really just step one of a hundred to get me back into the IndyCar series."

While other drivers are treating the iRacing IndyCar Challenge as a diversion and a bit of fun, for Wickens it is serious business taking him closer to his stated goal of getting back in the cockpit of an IndyCar.

That had seemed an impossible dream in the aftermath of his horrific crash on Aug. 19 almost two years ago when his car became airborne, catapulted into the catch-fencing and disintegrated across the track.

Along with a thoracic spinal fracture and a spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed, Wickens also suffered tibia and fibular fractures to both legs, fractures in both hands, a fractured right forearm, a fractured elbow, four fractured ribs and a pulmonary contusion.

Wickens's courageous efforts to walk, dance at his wedding and get back into a race car have been documented with regular posts on social media. —Reuters

## Sports

# Drogba joins row after French scientists suggest testing virus vaccine in Africa

## Idea of having Africa as a setting for vaccine is controversial

PARIS: Two leading French doctors on Friday insisted they had been misunderstood after sparking a storm of criticism by discussing the idea of testing a vaccine for coronavirus in Africa on television.

Although they later apologised for any offence caused if their comments had not been clear, former international and Ivory Coast football star Didier Drogba joined lawyers and a French anti-racism organisation in criticising the remarks made on Wednesday in a broadcast on the LCI channel.

Camille Loch, head of research at the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM) in Lille, was questioned about a shield for coronavirus using the well-known BCG vaccine for tuberculosis.

He was asked by Jean-Paul Mira, head of intensive care at the Cochin hospital in Paris, whether Africa offered better conditions for testing the vaccine.

"If I could be provocative, shouldn't we be doing this study in Africa, where there are no masks, no treatment, no intensive care, rather as was done with certain studies on AIDS, where things are tested on prostitutes because it's known that they are highly exposed (to HIV)?" Mira asked. "WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

Locht replied: "You're right, we are thinking in parallel by the way about a study in Africa with the same kind of approach, (but) it doesn't prevent us from being able to think about a study in Europe and Australia at the same time."

Scientists who carry out clinical trials to find conditions in which large numbers of people are exposed to the disease, as this gives a better opportunity for testing a new drug. Such trials are carried out under strict supervision, which requires volunteers to be briefed about any risks and to give their informed consent.



### Lawsuit for 'racial defamation'

But the idea of having Africa as a setting for a coronavirus vaccine is controversial.

#### 'RACIST'

Africa is the world's poorest continent and its citizens bear the least responsibility for spreading the virus, which originated in China and spread to the Middle East, Europe and the United States through jet travel. At the same time, Africans are badly exposed to the microbe, both in terms of preparedness and health care.

Former international football star Drogba was among those who criticised the remarks about testing in Africa.

"It is inconceivable that we continue to

accept this. Africa is not a laboratory. I strongly denounce these very serious, racist and contemptuous words," the former Chelsea and Marseille striker wrote on his Facebook page and on Twitter.

"Help us save lives in Africa and stop the spread of the virus that is destabilising the whole world instead of seeing us as guinea pigs. It is absurd." A French anti-racism NGO, SOS Racisme, issued a statement saying, "No, Africans aren't guinea pigs" and described the comparison with AIDS and prostitutes as "problematic" and "unwelcome."

#### DR CONGO READY

But in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the head of the national biological research institute, Jean-Jacques Muyembe, suggested that the country was prepared to take part in any testing of a future vaccine. "We've been chosen to conduct these tests. We're candidates," Muyembe said, suggesting that clinical trials could begin in July or August.

"At some point, COVID-19 will be uncontrollable," the virologist continued.

"The only way to control will be a vaccine, just like Ebola. It was a vaccine that helped us end the Ebola epidemic." The CSA, the ethics watchdog for radio and television in France, told AFP it had received a complaint. Among those who voiced anger on social media was an association of lawyers in Morocco, which said it planned to file a lawsuit for "racial defamation."

INSERM said that an "edited video was



Didier Drogba

leading to erroneous interpretations (of the comments) on social media."

It said on Twitter that trials would take place in several European countries and Australia, and "Africa should not be forgotten or excluded from research, as the pandemic is global." Mira closed down public access to his Twitter account after receiving what he said were threats and insults.

#### 'SINCEREST APOLOGIES'

He told the Huffington Post that he was deeply upset by the accusations made

against him, and apologised if his comments had not been "clear." "Clinical trials take place everywhere. Less so in Africa," he said. A trial conducted in a local setting could unlock knowledge that could lead to local benefits, he said.

He pointed to the study on sex workers and HIV, "which was done to protect prostitutes in South Africa."

Paris hospitals similarly issued a statement in which Mira offered his "sincerest apologies" to "those who were shocked and offended" by his comments. — AFP

## Sumo tournaments postponed: JSA

TOKYO: Two sumo tournaments scheduled for later this year have been postponed, the Japan Sumo Association (JSA) said Friday, the latest sporting events to fall victim to the coronavirus spreading in Japan.

The next sumo "basho" or tournament, scheduled to open on May 10 in Tokyo — host city of the next Olympics, which have been postponed to 2021 — will be delayed by two weeks, the JSA said. The July basho suffered the same fate.

The JSA has not yet decided whether the tournaments would be held without spectators, a spokesman told AFP. "Today we just rescheduled the two tournaments, but we can't say anything more as the situation is changing day by day," he said.

The spring basho, held last month in Osaka, took place without a crowd, the wrestlers surrounded by just a handful of judges in the empty arena.

It was however broadcast live on national TV, allowing viewers to hear sounds normally drowned out by the crowd, such as the wrestlers slapping their bellies and scraping their feet on the clay ring.

During that tournament, all wrestlers had their temperature checked twice a day as some rituals were amended, including the traditional ladle of water that a winning wrestler offers to the next in the ring.

Sumo stars have been taking precautions at fan events, refraining from shaking hands and wearing surgical masks, while a ceremonial visit to a shrine was cancelled. The no-spectator sumo tournament came after the government asked operators of sports



Sumo wrestler gets ready for action.

and entertainment venues to consider cancelling or postponing mass gatherings to help prevent the spread of the virus.

Late Friday, Japan's professional baseball and football leagues gave up plans to play in April after receiving warnings from infectious control experts.

Nippon Professional Baseball, which had already delayed opening this season until April 24, decided to extend its postponement.

Meanwhile, football's J-League — scheduled to

resume games in late April — also withdrew plans without setting a resumption date.

Earlier this week, organisers said the Tokyo Olympics would begin on July 23 next year after the coronavirus forced the historic decision to postpone the 2020 Games until 2021.

Japan has seen a relatively low number of coronavirus cases, but a recent spike in Tokyo has fuelled speculation that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will soon declare a state of emergency. — AFP

## ISL series to fund swimmers through to Tokyo Olympics

LONDON: The professional International Swimming League (ISL) will fund its contracted athletes with monthly payments from September through to next year's rescheduled Tokyo Olympics, the series announced on Friday.

It also plans to get all its 320 swimmers together for a five-week special event of training and competition, possibly filmed behind closed doors and with Australia the likely location, from Oct. 14-Nov. 17 subject to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hungary's 2016 triple Olympic gold medalist Katinka Hosszu told Reuters the 'Solidarity Program' would provide peace of mind at a time of uncertainty, with some countries in lockdown as they battle the new coronavirus.

"For us athletes, it's really important to get over this period of time and everyone will be able to prepare for next summer," she said. "They have some security as well as some racing and training camps to look forward to."

The Tokyo Games, originally scheduled to start in July this year, have been postponed to July 23-Aug. 8, 2021 due to the pandemic.

The ISL, launched last year as a fast-paced competition with 10 teams from Europe and North America featuring an array of world and Olympic champions and bankrolled by Ukrainian businessman Konstantin Grigorishin.

Olympic and world champion Caeleb Dressel, who competed in the inaugural

ISL season, liked the idea of doing it again but stopped short of committing to a return, due in part to uncertainty with his existing sponsorships.

"I don't know that far in advance what my schedule is going to be like ... or how the companies I am involved with at the moment what they are going to need from me within those months," Dressel told Reuters.

"I mean, I would love to compete in ISL, it was great last year, but I can't say 100% I am doing this because there are just so many uncertainties right now for everybody," Grigorishin told Reuters the contracted swimmers would each get a guaranteed \$1,500 a month from Sept. 1 to July 1 with \$11 million set aside to cover wages, bonuses, ambassador payments and prize money in a condensed season.

The total cost of paying for everything could amount to \$20 million, although that could be reduced by television deals and sponsorship and depends on the planned five-week 'radical swimming event' going ahead.

"During this five weeks we will organise 10 matches, like prelims," said Grigorishin. "And maybe one month later we organise finals, just one match for four teams. This is our ideal scenario."

"But it's hard to say. It's not easy to travel now and maybe there will be a lot of restrictions. So we have to find some place for the swimmers to collect them together. — Reuters

## England cricket stars donate £500,000

LONDON: England's centrally contracted cricketers have agreed to make an "initial donation" of £500,000 (\$612,000) in response to the financial crisis engulfing the game as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

Friday's statement issued by the Professional Cricketers' Association, the players' union, came just days after the England and Wales Cricket Board said chief executive Tom Harrison had volunteered to take a 25 percent pay cut.

Tuesday saw Harrison unveil the ECB's £61 million (\$76 million) aid package in response to the spread of COVID-19 which has seen the start of the English season delayed until May 28 and placed question marks over the future of lucrative incoming tours by the West Indies, Pakistan and Australia.

But with the ECB placing some administrative staff on the British government's reduced pay job retention furlough scheme, questions were raised over whether the likes of Test captain Joe Root and all-rounder Ben Stokes, who earns close to a £1 million a year from the ECB as a star performer in red and white ball cricket, should accept a salary reduction as well.

"Following a meeting today of all of the England men's centrally contracted cricketers, the players have agreed to

make an initial donation of £0.5million to the ECB and to selected good causes," said a statement issued by the PCA on behalf of England's Player Partnership group. "The precise details of the charitable donation will be decided over the next week by the players."

The statement added the contribution was the "equivalent of all of the England centrally contracted players taking a 20 percent reduction in their monthly retainers for the next three months". That 20 percent figure is significant because although Harrison, who has warned a season without any cricket at all could cost the ECB a whopping £300 million, said there were no plans to enforce a pay cut on players, a letter from him to PCA chief executive Tony Irish, leaked to the ESPNcricinfo website, showed him asking the players to accept a 20 percent cut.

"The players will continue to discuss with the ECB the challenging situation faced by the game and society as a whole and will consider how best to support the ECB and both the cricketing and wider community going forward," Friday's statement added.

World Cup-winning captain Eoin Morgan, asked 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." Meanwhile England women's centrally contracted players, who earn considerably less than their male counterparts, announced Friday they had volunteered a salary reduction for the next three months (April, May and June) in line with their coaches and support staff. — AFP

## UEFA demand leaves Scottish clubs in the lurch

LOBDON: UEFA's ultimatum to national leagues that a failure to complete the football season could lead to exclusion from European competition has left the continent's less wealthy leagues, like Scotland, in limbo.

Scottish clubs were due to meet by video-conference on Friday with the possibility of following the Belgian league's recommendation to call their season to an end amid the uncertainty caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

That meeting has now been pushed back to next week as Scottish clubs scramble just to survive in the months to come with matches indefinitely suspended on public health grounds.

Meagre television rights deals, in particular in comparison to the English Premier League across the border, have seen Scotland slide down the food chain of European football.

The existing broadcast contract for the Scottish Premiership is reportedly worth a total of just 21 million pounds (\$22.7 million) annually.

Clubs can therefore little afford to miss out on European competition, with even those who do not participate eligible for solidarity payments from UEFA.

"Since participation in UEFA club competitions is determined by the sporting result achieved at the end of a full domestic competition, a premature termination would cast doubts about the fulfilment of such condition," UEFA said in a joint letter with the European Clubs Association and European Leagues.

Many Scottish clubs had been keen for the season to be called as it stands — with Celtic crowned champions — so that prize money could be handed out to solve a cash-flow crisis.

A proposal for league reconstruction whereby two teams are promoted and no side relegated from the top four leagues would also mitigate the damage and any potential legal challenges. Instead, as so often, Scottish clubs have had to turn to their fanbases for support.

#### CELTIC MULL WAGE CUTS

According to UEFA's latest Club Licensing Benchmark report, gate receipts provide 43 percent of revenue for the 12 clubs in the Scottish Premiership, by far the highest in Europe's top 20 leagues.

The inability to play games and get people through the gate has already resulted in Hearts asking players to take a 50 percent pay cut and members of the Hibernian squad deferring up to half their salary.

Wage deferrals are also on the horizon at Aberdeen, while even Celtic, who had 33 million pounds cash in the bank in their latest financial figures in February, are mulling wage cuts according to manager Neil Lennon.

Despite the fate of this season hanging in the balance, clubs are looking ahead with season tickets for the 2020/21 campaign a means to a short-term cash injection.

"I've been heartened by the messages of support I have received from fans asking what they can do to help the club through this really difficult period," said Aberdeen chairman Dave Cormack. — AFP

**18** Ecclestone to be father again at age of 89



**18** Joshua's heavyweight title defence postponed by coronavirus outbreak



**19** Sumo tournaments postponed: JSA



## Premier League to push players for wage cut



**BRIGHTON:** File photo taken on August 12, 2017. The Premier league trophy sits beside the pitch ahead of the English Premier League football match between Brighton and Hove Albion and Manchester City in Brighton. Premier League clubs will ask players to take a combination of pay cuts and deferrals amounting to 30 percent of their salary due to the financial crisis caused by coronavirus. — AFP

**LONDON:** The Premier League has said its clubs will consult with their players over a proposed 30% reduction in wages and the suspended season would only resume when it was "safe and appropriate".

The league accepted that a previous target of returning to action in early May would not now happen and said on Friday it was keeping the restart date under "constant review".

While there has been speculation about a reduced season or even abandoning this campaign, the league said the aim was still to complete all remaining domestic league and cup matches.

"However, any return to play will only be with the full support of Government and when medical guidance allows," it added in a statement <https://www.premierleague.com/news/1651836>.

With lower league clubs facing a cash-flow crisis due to the coronavirus outbreak, the top-flight teams

voted to make an advance of 125 million pounds (\$153.13 million) to the Football League (EFL) and National League sides.

The EFL, which consists of the 72 professional clubs in the three divisions below the Premier League, said the cash they would receive from the top flight included early solidarity payments, parachute payments and Academy Grants.

Much of the focus of talks between officials this week has been the issue of player compensation during the halt in play.

The league said its clubs "unanimously agreed to consult their players regarding a combination of conditional reductions and de-

ferred amounting to 30 percent of total annual remuneration". Talks with the players' union, the PFA, will continue on Saturday, as the two sides seek an agreement on compensation during the stoppage.

Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston said it was right that players' wages were on the table when there were lower-paid staff at some clubs being furloughed.

"The football authorities must all be aware of the strength of public feeling on this and I expect them to show leadership on the matter," he said. The Premier League said it was "committing 20 million pounds to support the NHS (National Health Service), communities, families and vulnerable groups during

the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This includes a direct financial contribution to the NHS and funds to enable clubs to refocus their efforts and develop significant outreach programmes to help communities, including those most in need."

Less than 24 hours after Health Minister Matt Hancock said players should take a pay cut and "play their part" in the national effort to tackle the pandemic, two moves also emerged from the players themselves.

Manchester United captain Harry Maguire asked his team mates to donate 30% of their salaries to local hospitals and was given backing by the squad.

England defender Maguire was among the 20 Premier League captains who took part in a call on Thursday evening to discuss a collective response and donation with plans now expected to be developed. — Reuters



### Restart date on hold

## RA chief executive Castle set to be axed: Reports

**SYDNEY:** Rugby Australia's chief executive Raelene Castle could be sacked in a matter of days, local media reported yesterday, as the embattled governing body struggles to deal with a financial crisis compounded by the coronavirus shutdown.

Castle this week took a 50% pay cut and laid off 75% of Rugby Australia (RA) staff, saying the body faced losses of up to A\$120 million (\$71.94 million) if no more rugby was played this year.

With no pay agreement secured with the players, and their representatives calling on RA to provide

more financial information ahead of negotiations, the sport has endured another week of negative headlines.

The Australian and The Daily Telegraph both reported that Castle had lost the confidence of a board to which three new members were added at this week's Annual General Meeting.

Former Australia captain Phil Kearns, who lost out when New Zealander Castle was appointed in 2017, was named as her likely successor by both newspapers. RA later said in a statement that it had shared specific financial information with the Rugby Union Players Association (RUPA) on Saturday regarding a short-term pay deal.

"... Rugby Australia believes the financial information it has provided today allows RUPA to accurately advise the players on these negotiations," it said. The parties would meet on Sunday to take the negotiations forward, it said.

"... we look forward to reaching a fair and reason-

able agreement given the current circumstances the game is facing."

Castle took significant flak for her handling of the dismissal of Wallabies fullback Israel Folau last year, the costs of which contributed to a A\$9.4 million loss in 2019. She has also been criticised for spurning an offer from Fox Sports TV to extend their broadcast deal and instead taking the rights to market, potentially leaving Rugby Australia without a television deal at the end of 2020.

Earlier, New South Wales Waratahs coach Campbell Aitken admitted there were mixed emotions for his team after they secured their third straight Super W title by declaration because of the coronavirus outbreak.

With all rugby in Australia suspended until at least June 1, Rugby Australia made the call to name the Waratahs, who were top of the women's competition standings with four wins out of four and three bonus points, champions on Friday.

"It is mixed emotions for us, obviously I'm happy for the players and staff after all the effort they put in but disappointed we didn't get a chance to play in the grand final and put on a show for our home fans," Aitken told rugby.com.au.

The third year of the competition was cut short before a playoff to decide which of the Queensland Reds or ACT Brumbies would meet the Waratahs, who have never lost a Super W match, in this year's final.

Despite Rugby Australia facing a financial crisis amid the coronavirus shutdown, director of rugby Scott Johnson said the governing body would continue to back the women's game.

"Women's rugby is going from strength to strength in Australia and, whilst rugby may be paused for now, we will continue to support our women's programmes as we build towards the Olympic Games and the Women's Rugby World Cup in New Zealand next year," he said in Friday's statement. — Reuters