

# Friday Times

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## Virus crisis could remain until yearend

### 55 new cases • MoI will receive Bangladeshi violators from April 11

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** The health ministry yesterday reported 55 new coronavirus cases, a big drop from the past few days, raising the total to 910 cases. Of the new cases, 37 are Indians, six Bangladeshis, six Kuwaitis and the rest from different nationalities. The ministry said of the 798 cases receiving treatment at hospitals, 22 of them are in intensive care units, eight in critical condition.

Health Minister Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah yesterday said that the coronavirus crisis could last longer than initially believed and may continue into next year, as the health ministry began a test drive in two areas under lockdown. "It appears that this crisis is lasting longer in the world and is likely to continue into next year. It is clear that we are still in the phase of the curve going upward strongly," the minister told reporters after touring a medical facility for expats at the fairground.

He also said experts are expecting coronavirus cases to reach three million at the end of April and could double the next month. Sheikh Basel appealed to people not to venture out unless it is extremely necessary, saying this is the only way of combating the disease. The minister said that the situation in

Kuwait is under control as the number of cases has not increased rapidly as in other countries.

The ministry of health meanwhile began a drive to test some half a million expats residing in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, which were placed under lockdown a few days ago after a steep rise in the number of cases among expat workers, a majority of them Indian nationals. In the past four days, about 400 cases were reported, almost half of the total cases discovered in Kuwait so far and a majority of them expat workers.

The interior ministry's relations and security information department also announced that the dates to receive residency violators from India have changed to April 16 to 20; instead the ministry will receive Bangladeshis from April 11 to 15.

In another development, MP Riyadh Al-Adasani said he plans to file to grill Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Sheetan over the country's finances and alleged mismanagement, especially after the government sought to borrow some KD 20 billion. He also cited another reason after the Central Bank of Kuwait allegedly refused to launch an investigation into exposures worth \$300 million by Kuwaiti banks against a UAE health establishment founded by an Indian billionaire businessman. The establishment is facing serious financial and

legal problems and may not be able to repay a massive \$6.6 billion in debt.

The announcement came following a meeting yesterday between Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem along with about 21 MPs with the government economic team. Ghanem said the discussions focused on the government debt law, which many MPs called on the government to withdraw and then submit a clear roadmap showing where the borrowed funds will be used. The speaker said the debt law was prepared before the coronavirus crisis and therefore has no relation with the stimulus package, and accordingly will not find the required majority to pass it.

MP Omar Al-Tabtabaei said the fiscal position of the state is catastrophic and if the government does not propose real solutions, the state may not be able to pay salaries of public sector employees after three or four months. He said the immediate requirement is that the government should utilize billions of dinars in profits being kept for years at some government departments and establishments. MP Safa Al-Hashem launched a scathing attack on the finance minister, saying his performance has been very disappointing. She called on the prime minister to dismiss him and Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi.

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## Protecting our readers

We at Kuwait Times are keen to protect the health and safety of our readers, our employees and our beloved Kuwait. To that end, and in line with Ministry of Health guidelines, we are halting the print edition of the newspaper to avoid readers' contact with any unnecessary surfaces that might get contaminated on the way to you while maintaining your source of up to date news. The suspension of the print edition will begin Friday, April 10 until further notice.

Kuwait Times is committed to providing updated, in-depth reporting on all news and information our readers need to know in these challenging times and will continue to publish via all our digital channels. Stay home, stay safe and stay informed with Kuwait Times.

## Local

## The mask

Pandemic Diaries

By Jamie Etheridge

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**T**he mask is made from the body of an old t-shirt. We cut the bottom third off, fold it into thirds, slide elastic hair ties on each end, fold the ends over and voila! - a cloth face covering. It may not help. I put my palm up in front of his face and he breathes, pushing air out and I feel the heat of his breath on my skin. Not good enough. So we use a different shirt, with a thicker, tighter weave and we add an extra fold. This time when he breathes out, no air reaches my hand.

Ready for the grocery run. We are grateful we have access to food, a safe place to live, freedom to go and come and get the supplies we need. Not everyone is as lucky. Some will queue for hours, bunched up into tight knots of impatient humanity, social distancing impossible in the urgent crush for rice and bread.

We make a list, careful to focus on items needed and to limit luxuries to things like fresh fruit (I'm a sucker for lemons and oranges) and Greek yogurt for the kids. He puts on the masks, tucks the list into his



**Many millions are struggling - out of work, out of food, out of hope**

pocket and heads out into the world. It's dangerous out there, potentially fatal, but one of us must go and so he does. I stay home with the children.

The above might read like an excerpt from a science fiction novel or a scene from Mad Max but it's not. This is our morning routine in Kuwait, a family of four, staying home, staying safe while fording the dangerous waters of daily life in the time of a global pandemic.

And we are among the lucky. We have cars and jobs still. We have an apartment with a small balcony. We have each other. We have our health still. It is easy to complain, to bemoan the long hours of 'staying at home', the boredom and the cabin fever.

But there are so many millions struggling - out of work, out of food, out of hope. Millions in India forced to walk hundreds of miles to reach their villages with little food, water or money and no help from the government. Millions around the globe without a job. In Kuwait, in the areas of lockdown, people must risk their lives and their health in order to queue for hours for a packet of bread, some rice and lentils. They linger along the roads, waiting for an opportunity, for work, for something.

We have hope. And so we make a mask. Even if it doesn't fit properly. Even if it's from an old t-shirt. Even if the creases don't lie perfectly flat.

## Justice for animals

Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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**D**ogs and cats are commonly known as man's best friends. While they reduce stress, they increase our happiness and joy, are our companions and playmates for children and share the same roof and food with us - they are family members. This is why we need to protect them at all times, especially now.

During the recent period of curfew, I have been following several shocking videos, reports and images from around the world that show animal cruelty cases that have been reported in the last three months. I saw a video from an Asian country where shop owners shut their shops during the curfew and left animals to starve to death for a week, until a few of them were rescued by animal rights activists.

I believe that animal abuse is a common practice in both rural and urban areas in many countries. Unfortunately, some cases of animal cruelty are never reported, making it difficult to make an accurate estimation on how common they are. But we can use the information we have today to build a case to make the right global call to prevent more cases of abuse around the world.

I know that it is common, especially now, for people to consider that humans have priority, so animal rights are not viewed in earnest. I also think some may make excuses to be cruel to animals or at least throw them out of the house. They may intentionally ignore the fact that when a pet lives all its

life in a house, it could easily fall prey to accidents on the streets by humans or cars.

I know very well that many countries of the world, including Kuwait, have animal welfare laws. Kuwait issued such a law in 2015. The law stipulates penalties of up to one year imprisonment and a fine of KD 1,000 for anyone who abuses, neglects or offers animals for sale while being sick or subjects them to scientific experiments without a license. Likewise, in many European and Asian countries, the laws do not prevent harsh practices against a large number of animals. I believe the Swiss animal protection law to be the best, as it stipulates that when dealing with an animal, its dignity and existential value must be respected, with strict laws that penalize animal abuse.

According to the classification of the World Index for Animal Protection, Switzerland is the only European country that requires all dog owners to provide them with an electronic chip and register them in a central database. As for cats, they should be in daily contact with humans or other cats.

We are in need for education to the public that cats and dogs cannot transmit the novel coronavirus to humans, but they may develop low levels of the disease if it is transmitted from infected people. This conclusion was reached by the Hong Kong Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, after a quarantined dog was found to have a small percentage of the virus. There are also theories that talk about the relationship between animals and the virus, but none of it has been proven to date.

We need more foundations for animal welfare and they should have an allocated budget within the government's national budget, and no veterinary hospitals should be working on their own. Please remember that dogs and cats are vulnerable animals and may fall victim to illness or death in case of neglect or abuse.

## It's a small world - or is it?

IN MY VIEW

By Abdellatif Sharaa

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**W**hen we heard about the coronavirus in Wuhan, some of us were guilty, including myself, of being lax in taking precautions, because Wuhan is around 6,500 km away from Kuwait. We assumed that regardless of how dangerous the virus is, it will not be easily transferred to us. Then soon enough we found out the virus began to hit everywhere and fast, from Brazil in the south to Norway in the north and everywhere in between.

We knew much earlier that the world has become a small village, because of the Internet and its applications. Add to that the so-called globalization that became supreme, as one treaty after another were being signed for free trade, as an example, and free trade zones were being created between countries via bilateral agreements.

The virus' nature enables it to stick like a glue on any material, and experts say that it can live for hours to a few days depending on the material it contaminates. For example, a shipment from Wuhan to any city in Europe or Asia takes a few hours to arrive (Wuhan as we know is a major Chinese industrial city, and it is almost back to normal now).

We must forget the idea that a country like China is far away and others are nearby, as we all are now a virtual single community. Wuhan is almost 10,000 km away from New York, but it is obvious how devastating the pandemic has been there. Passengers travelling became vehicles transporting the virus from one place to another.

Governments that realized the danger early found out that aircraft are one of the quickest means of spreading the virus around because of the sheer numbers of people they carry in close proximity from each other, and that is why they closed their airports and suspended commercial flights.

It is amazing how a virus that cannot be seen kept people in check and confined them not only in their countries, but in their own homes - very strange!

The coronavirus revealed something that can hardly be believed, as some countries showed selfishness, be they superpowers or otherwise, as they refused passage of simple things like masks and sanitizers to their destinations and confiscated them for their own. This shows how quickly things can change and how globalization can be thrown out of the window, even if temporarily, when it comes to one's own interests.

I hope that lessons are learned from what happened and the world community cooperates for the sake of all, because if not, all will fail without exception.

A final word: "Unity is strength...when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved." - Mattie Stepanek, an American poet



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# LIFE UNDER



Police officers man a checkpoint in Mahboula after the area was put under lockdown.



Filipinos who availed the general amnesty granted by the Kuwaiti government gather at Kuwait International Airport's Terminal 4 on their way home to Manila.



A volunteer checks the temperature of a shopper at Mishref Co-operative Society.



A mechanic sits outside a shuttered garage.

**K**uwait this week placed a full lockdown on Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula and extended its partial curfew by two hours to run from 5 pm till 6 am until further notice. It also extended a previously enacted suspension of work for all ministries and government institutions by two weeks until April 26 as precautionary measure against the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, expats queue up daily with their documents and luggage to avail of an amnesty allowing residency violators to leave the country between April 1 and April 30 without paying any fines or airfare with a chance to return to Kuwait later.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Fouad Al-Shaikh



Egyptians queue up outside a school that was turned into a center to receive residency violators wishing to avail an amnesty.



# LOCKDOWN



Workers prepare to place Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh under lockdown.



Industrial areas of Shuwaikh and Sharq wear a deserted look with shuttered shops.



# Tenants fret as deadline for paying rent approaching fast

Many building owners do not want to make concessions



By Ben Garcia

Despite calls for a rent moratorium in Kuwait, there is no government decision yet whether tenants should pay the monthly rent during the ongoing shutdown. The deadline for paying rent for many tenants all over Kuwait is on the 10th of the month, but many expat workers have received partial or no salaries.

"I have informed the haris that I will not be able to pay this month, but he insisted we have to pay by April 10," said Anna (not her real name), a tenant in Farwaniya. "I did not get a salary in March. I am a salon worker, and since the government shut salons in early March, I do not have any

money in hand right now," she told Kuwait Times tearfully.

Mohamed, a mandoub from Egypt who lives in Salmiya, shared similar sentiments. "How can I pay? They know we haven't been paid for the month of March, or even April. I will not pay a single dinar even if they drag me to the police station," he said. He told Kuwait Times his haris already reminded him three times on April 1, 3 and 5 to pay up.

"Everyone in the world knows about the crisis. This is not just in Kuwait - this crisis is everywhere. They should be thankful because we are not crying for help with regards to food, now that we are all locked down. My remaining money is reserved for survival in case the situation worsens; I

will not give it away," the visibly-upset tenant said.

Other tenants in Fahaheel have also been reminded to pay the rent. They live four to a flat, but all have no work and no pay. "Our haris came yesterday and reminded us to pay. But we told him we cannot pay for March and April, since we do not have work, and the company is not willing to pay our salaries. In fact, we do not even have enough food; we are only surviving since some Good Samaritan is giving us some food to survive. If the crisis persists, we will definitely die," one of the tenants stressed.

Mary Grace and her flat mates in Mahboula were also reminded by their building haris to pay the rent before the April 10 deadline. "We wrote a letter requesting a

waiver to pay the rent. But the building owner told us not even a single dinar in discount will be given. We all have no work and we are staying at home since early March. I don't know what to do - the flat is under my name. My flat mates are not willing to pay because they do not have money too. The building owner is too hardheaded and wouldn't accept any explanation. I don't know what to do," she said.

Many expats in Kuwait share rooms and apartments to save money. The average rent of a two-bedroom apartment is KD 300 to KD 350 depending on the size of the rooms. For a thrifty tenant, sharing it with other boarders makes the rent affordable. Most expat workers in Kuwait are paid KD 250 to KD 500.

# Kuwait Times

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## Local

# Army aircraft with medical supplies returns from China

## Ambassador supervising air corridor between China and Kuwait

**KUWAIT:** A Kuwait army transport plane returned home from China Wednesday, carrying tons of medical equipment and supplies to help the government curb spread of coronavirus, the ministry of defense said. This is the seventh army plane in service as part of repatriation and delivery operations aimed at providing logistical support to government bodies, the ministry said in a statement. This journey, it added, was in cooperation and coordination with the ministry of health to provide medical equipment and supplies.

Earlier on Wednesday, Kuwaiti Ambassador in Beijing Sameh Hayat said the transport aircraft, which took off from the Chinese city of Guangzhou, was loaded with 55 tons of medical supplies. Hayat, in a statement to KUNA, said he was supervising an air corridor between China and Kuwait to support the "strategic storage" in the country to help it curb the spread of coronavirus. The ambassador thanked senior Chinese officials for facilitating transport of medical supplies for Kuwait. He also praised the Kuwait army for carrying out this mission. — KUNA



**KUWAIT:** A Kuwait army plane loaded with medical supplies arrives in Kuwait. — KUNA

## Oil producers intend to cut 10-15m barrels

**KUWAIT:** Top oil producers meeting later yesterday intend to cut production by between 10 and 15 million barrels per day, Kuwait's Oil Minister Khaled Al-Fadhel said. The talks between OPEC and other major producers come as oil languishes at near-two decade lows, with Russia and Saudi Arabia's price war compounding slack demand caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

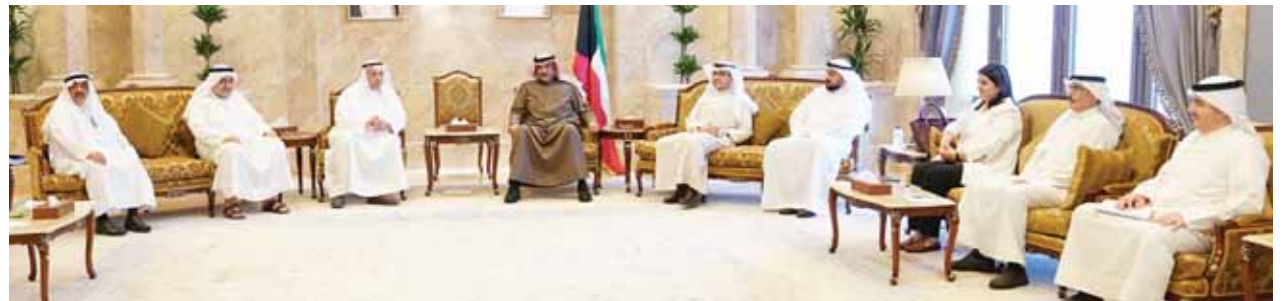
"Through our continuous consultations in the past weeks, I confirm that the intention is to conclude an agreement to cut production by a large amount ranging between 10 million bpd and 15 million bpd," Fadhel said in an interview with Kuwaiti daily Al-Rai published yesterday. He said the aim of the huge reduction is to "restore balance to the market and prevent further drops in the prices".

OPEC, led by leading exporter Saudi Arabia, and other top producers including Russia was to meet via video conference later yesterday amid hopes they will agree to cut output to shore up prices. Fadhel said negotiations were still continuing to secure the participation of a larger number of major producers such as the United States, Brazil, Canada, Argentina, Columbia and Norway. "There are also very important discussions still ongoing over how to distribute quotas and reductions among the countries," said the Kuwaiti minister, adding that some progress has been made.

Kuwait, OPEC's fifth largest producer, boosted its output to over three million bpd amid a price war that sent prices crashing. Fadhel said he was optimistic about striking a new deal to counter a sharp drop in demand, estimated by some studies at as high as 25 million bpd, or a quarter of global supplies. Oil prices extended gains yesterday after Russia, the world's second producer, signalled it was ready to make a big output cut at the OPEC+ meeting.

US benchmark West Texas Intermediate rose 4.6 percent to \$26.26 a barrel, while Brent crude, the international benchmark, jumped 2.7 percent to \$33.73. Moscow said Wednesday it is willing to cut output by about 1.6 million barrels a day, Bloomberg News reported. Another key meeting takes place today, when G20 energy ministers hold talks remotely to discuss steps to steady the market. — AFP

## PM commends important role of Audit Bureau



**KUWAIT:** HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets State Audit Bureau President Faisal Al-Shaya.

**KUWAIT:** HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah Wednesday commended "important and constructive" role of the State Audit Bureau in supporting government's efforts to curb spread of coronavirus. The prime minister made the remarks during a meeting with Audit Bureau President Faisal Al-Shaya at Seif Palace, attended by Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah and Health Minister Sheikh Dr Bassel Al-Sabah, an official statement said.

Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled said the contribution of the bureau to government's efforts "reflects the national responsibility" of

the auditors. He called on the importance of continuing this cooperation to overcome this crisis. The two sides discussed coordination and cooperation in this "critical phase", which required collaboration of government agencies to preserve public funds and maintain supervision.

Shaya commended the government's "exceptional" endeavors in confronting the pandemic. He said he acknowledged the government needed exceptional measures to prevent a delay in auditing. The meeting was also attended by Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Housing Rana Al-Fares. — KUNA

## Police arrest six expats for rioting

**KUWAIT:** The interior ministry arrested six expats who caused riots and will take legal measures against them and deport them from the country. In a press statement, the ministry said on Wednesday it received a complaint from a representative of a private company stating that a group of workers gathered and tried to assault him while delivering their salaries.

It added that a rescue patrol immediately moved to the location of the incident and upon its arrival, one of the company's workers assaulted the police car. The patrol commander fired a precautionary shot in the air to disperse the gathering. The ministry stressed that an investigation has been carried out and the rest of the workers involved were being arrested and referred to the authorities. — KUNA



## Local

# Fight against coronavirus in two hotspots in Kuwait to take weeks

## Areas crowded with expats most vulnerable to outbreak

**KUWAIT:** Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said Wednesday that public health teams are making intensive pandemic investigation in the two recently identified hotspots of the novel coronavirus. "It will take weeks to stem the tide of the pandemic in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh in Farwaniyah governorate and Mahboula in Ahmadi governorate, which have been placed under total lockdown," the minister told reporters.

Sheikh Basel made the comments after touring the fairgrounds in Mishref and Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital in Jabriya in Hawally governorate. He did not rule out the possibility of detecting more hotspots in the coming weeks despite the unprecedented measures to contain cases of community transmission.

He recalled his earlier warnings that areas crowded with expatriate workers are most vul-

nerable to the outbreak, given the fact that their residents are less responsive to the guidelines of public health. "The living conditions and social habits of these people make them more liable for infection with the virus than others," Sheikh Basel said, affirming the ability of his ministry to conduct more COVID-19 tests and address any surges in cases.

On the evolving situation of the pandemic worldwide, he said: "Data received constantly show that this pandemic is unparalleled in terms of the scale and speed of its spread. The figures coming out so far are by no means final; they depend on the tests conducted and the persons who showed up, but there are many lone wolves everywhere. Nearly 50 percent of people who contract COVID-19 worldwide are asymptomatic; here lies the problem. They can unknow-

ingly convey the infection to others. The only way to defeat the pandemic is to stay at home and keep social distancing."

Sheikh Basel noted that this was the main theme of the video conference he had with senior officials of the World Health Organization (WHO) last week. Sheikh Basel affirmed that the ministry of health is in an open-ended session to assess the efficacy of measures adopted and analyze their outcomes with a view to maximizing the positive aspects. He highlighted the importance of precautionary measures in addressing any eventuality, noting that the situation in Kuwait is generally better than many other countries regarding the number of cases and fatalities.

Sheikh Basel appreciated the efforts of medical cadres who are on the frontline of the battle against the pandemic to save the lives of citizens

and expatriates, stressing the need of commitment by everybody to the health precautions. Citing global studies, Sheikh Dr Basel said the current crisis is expected to continue until

the end of summer or the yearend. Some studies predict the number of cases worldwide to hit three million by the end of April and then double in the coming month, he said, voicing hope for finding a cure in the near future. — KUNA



Dr Basel Al-Sabah

## Kuwait Food Bank provides food aid to needy families

By Faten Omar

**KUWAIT:** Life in Kuwait has largely been put on hold, hitting businesses and employees badly. Many of them have lost their jobs and daily-wage workers are suffering, while others are struggling for food due to the coronavirus pandemic. More than half a million citizens and residents living in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula are under a lockdown as a precautionary measure to face COVID-19.

Many charities are distributing food to people in these areas. General Manager of Kuwait Food Bank Salem Al-Hamar told Kuwait Times that KFB is distributing food to needy families and individuals. "Since the coronavirus outbreak, we are helping needy people. We are disturbing 18,900 daily meals to individuals and more to families," he said.

Hamar explained that during this period, many have lost their jobs and need to provide food for their families, noting that the number of distributions has increased during the coronavirus pandemic, as Kuwait Food Bank used to distribute only 2,000 meals daily to individuals. "Most of the distributions are in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, Farwaniya, Khaitan and some other areas," he added. Meanwhile, Hamar invited people affected by the coronavirus crisis to communicate with the food bank via its website <https://www.kuwaitfoodbank.org> to be provided with needed food aid. The bank's database is constantly updated to add names of poor families with food delivered by professional volunteer teams.

In March, Kuwait Food Bank launched a project for more than 60,000 beneficiaries in various areas of Kuwait, as their number increased compared to last year. The project aims to distribute food aid, nutritional needs and necessary supplies to widows, divorced women, the elderly, the sick, people with special needs, orphans and poor people throughout the year in cooperation with the Awqaf Public Foundation.

Likewise, Kuwait's Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor launched a central online database for disadvantaged families to receive aid, according to KUNA. The database allows 52 charitable organizations to coordinate their efforts to ensure there are no overlaps in aid supply and all families in need receive help.

## Blood bank produces artificial plasma to combat COVID-19

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Central Blood Bank (KCBB) has started producing plasma artificially to help treat patients suffering from the novel coronavirus, Director of KCBB's blood transfusion division Dr Reem Al-Radhwan announced on Wednesday. The process entails collecting plasma from donors who were formerly COVID-19 patients and then transfusing it into the blood of patients to strengthen their immunity, she said in a statement to KUNA.

"According to the standards of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the American Association of Blood Banks (AABB), plasma donation from former patients should start soon after the end of their home quarantine. When a person contracts a disease, their bodies start producing antibodies to face the new enemy," she said.

"In the case of the respiratory disease COVID-19, a former patient keeps a high level of antibodies three weeks after their recovery, and then the antibodies start taking a downward slant towards the normal level. Therefore, the plasma generating process requires setting a time schedule for each donor," Radhwan explained, noting that a recovered person can help treat three patients. The plasma donation is conducted at the KCBB Headquarters in Jabriya, she said, appreciating the efforts of the medical teams that contributed to the start of this process in Kuwait. — KUNA



KUWAIT: A man donates blood at the Kuwait Central Blood Bank. — KUNA

# Friday Times International

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China seeks to halt 'silent carriers' of coronavirus

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## Lebanon import woes deepen as supply chains buckle under virus



LONDON: A general view is seen of St Thomas' Hospital in central London yesterday where Britain's prime minister is in intensive care as he fights the novel coronavirus COVID-19. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday began a fourth day in intensive care "improving" in his battle with coronavirus, as his government prepared to extend a nationwide lockdown introduced last month. — AFP

# Coronavirus death toll crosses 87,000

## Trump sees light at end of tunnel as global infections touch 1.5 million

WASHINGTON: The coronavirus pandemic notched up another round of record death tolls in the United States and Europe, dousing the optimism of US President Donald Trump who insisted there was light at the end of the tunnel. The virus has now killed more than 87,000 people and infected over 1.5 million, according to an AFP tally yesterday, sparing almost no country and tipping the world into a devastating economic crisis as global commerce shudders to a halt.

France saw its total number of dead climb over 10,000 as the country prepared to extend its strict lockdown measures. Spain and Italy are still seeing hundreds of deaths per day despite tentative signs the disease may have peaked.

And the pandemic is marching into areas previously only lightly affected: in Africa, Ethiopia declared a state of emergency and Liberia said it was locking down its capital Monrovia.

Its deadly tentacles also crept deep into the Amazon rainforest, with the first case detected

among the Yanomami, an indigenous people isolated from the world until the mid-20th century and vulnerable to disease. Nevertheless, some glimmers of hope shone in the darkness, with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo saying the epidemic curve seemed to be flattening. "We are hopefully heading towards a final stretch, the light at the end of the tunnel," said Trump.

### 'Playing with fire'

All around the world, medical facilities are at bursting point as they struggle with a relentless procession of critically-ill patients. In the badly affected city of Guayaquil in Ecuador, sick patients are passing out before arriving at emergency care and the elderly are slumped outside in wheelchairs at overwhelmed hospitals.

"My grandmother died, my mother has all the symptoms, my 15-year-old sister too and the government is doing nothing, nothing! We need to be almost dying in order to receive assistance," said Xiomara Franco, a relative of a sick patient. "There is a lack of oxygen, a lack of medicine, a lack of nurses and doctors, a lack of stretchers," complained Henry Figueroa, another angry relative.

At the global level, the World Health Organization and Trump are embroiled in an ugly war of words, with Trump accusing the UN body of

"blowing it" and being too close to China.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged unity at a time of global crisis, saying: "If you don't want many more body bags, then you refrain from politicizing it."

"It's like playing with fire."

### 'Better to die'

Governments are wrestling with the problem of when to exit lockdown procedures and reboot a global economy that is effectively in deep freeze. The World Trade Organization warned the pandemic was likely to spark the deepest recession "of our lifetimes," with global trade poised to plummet by one third. The Bank of France estimated the country's economy shrank around six percent in the first quarter—the worst performance since the end of World War II.

Europe powerhouse Germany is seen contracting an eye-watering 10 percent as the eurozone squabbled about pooling debt for "coronabonds" to help the worst-affected members such as Spain and Italy. In Miami, hundreds lined up in cars to get unemployment forms after the website crashed due to a surge in demand.

Gus Rios, a 67-year-old former factory worker, said: "People are looking for help, people (are) crazy right now, almost, to get something because

we don't know the situation how long is going to be." Recent US data indicate 10 million people have lost their jobs in the world's top economy that is closed for business. In India, a virus-induced lockdown is hitting the millions of poor hardest as they wait for promised government food subsidies that cannot come quick enough for mother-of-three Rajni Devi, 30. "Last night we had roti (Indian flatbread) with salt mixed in mustard oil," she said. "It's better to die than starve like this."

### 'Doing something good'

The pandemic has forced half of humanity inside, an unprecedented measure that has allowed wildlife to reclaim previously choked streets. In India, hundreds of monkeys are running riot in the roads around the presidential palace while peacocks display their spectacular trains on top of parked cars in Mumbai. In Vienna, animals are being conscripted into the fight against the virus, with horse-drawn carriages converted from a tourist attraction to a food delivery service. Christian Gerzabek, who drives one of the famous city "Fiaker", said business had crawled to a halt but "the horses still have to be moved, they want to get out after the winter." "I thought that we should combine that... with doing something good for people who need it," he said. —AFP

## International

# Lebanon import woes deepen as supply chains buckle under virus

## Suppliers delay shipments to Lebanon, refuse orders

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon's food importers, already hit by a dollar crunch, have struggled to book new cargoes as the coronavirus pandemic threatens supplies and sparks fears of even more painful price hikes.

Some vendors are delaying shipments and refusing new orders to Lebanon - which relies heavily on imports - as the spread of the virus slows global food supply chains. This comes at a grim time for Lebanon. A financial crisis has wiped out about half the value of the currency and sent prices skyrocketing for months. Supply disruptions, twinned with the hard currency squeeze, risk fueling more inflation as poverty levels rise. Prices of consumer goods have nearly doubled in the past six months. Food importers like Hani Bohsali said pressure was piling on stocks, already reduced by banking controls that force buyers to get scarce dollars on an informal market.

Last week, Bohsali was told Moroccan sardines were no longer available after fishermen stopped going out - and even if they did, tins from Spain were running thin. Before that, a cooking oil shipment from Ukraine and lentils from Australia were each postponed a month because of labor shortages.



### Dollars more scarce during lockdown

"Everything is slowing down and I fear that globally, the worst is yet to come," he said.

#### Food security

As major state buyers from Saudi Arabia to Egypt look to beef up their strategic stocks, for the first time in years Lebanon's government is thinking of importing wheat itself, a job usually left to private mills. Economy Minister Raoul Nehme told Reuters the cabinet had authorized importing 80,000 tons though this was not "in the works today".

"It is just a measure to be ready at any point in case we need it, for food security...to have an additional security stock." The government has warned that foreign currency reserves plummeted to "dangerous" levels, pledging to keep them for key goods: wheat, fuel and medicine.

Buyers of staples like grains worry other countries will hold back shipments as the pandemic drags on or choose not to prioritize the small nation of around six million. "The interruptions because of the lack of cash dollars, the lockdowns abroad, we're going to see the impact in two months," said Nabil Fahed, an importer who heads the supermarket syndicate. "The supplies will not be there...I'm

immediately respond to a request for comment.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement the United States concurred in the new report's findings, calling them "the latest in a large and growing body of evidence that the Assad regime uses chemical weapons attacks in Syria as part of a deliberate campaign of violence against the Syrian people." Washington also assesses that Assad's government retains enough sarin and chlorine and expertise "to use sarin, produce and deploy chlorine munitions and develop new CW (chemical weapons)," Pompeo said. Damascus should immediately halt the production, stockpiling and use of such weapons, he said.

The OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) said more than 100 people were affected by the 2017 attacks, carried out on March 24, 25 and 30 in the town of Ltamenah.

According to the IIT report, the 50th Brigade of the 22nd Air Division of the Syrian Air Force dropped M4000 aerial bombs containing sarin on the town and a cylinder containing chlorine on a hospital. The raids were conducted from the Sharat and Hama air bases, it said. "Military operations of such a strategic nature as these three attacks only occur pursuant to orders from the highest levels of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces," it said. While individuals were identified by the OPCW investigators, their names have been redacted from the report, which was to be circulated to the OPCW's 193 member states on Wednesday. — Reuters



**BEIRUT:** A Lebanese bakery manager, wearing a protective face mask amid the COVID-19 outbreak, poses for a picture in the capital Beirut, in this file photo. — AFP

really worried about this".

#### 'Nobody selling'

With a tiny industrial sector and scant natural resources, Lebanon's economy produces few goods. Fahed, who owns a major supermarket chain, said prices for most goods have risen 45-50%, with some already running out. Any harsher shortages could still be a few months off. Importers put stocks of most goods at 1-2 months and super-

markets remain largely full despite some panic shopping during Lebanon's shutdown.

"I work on wheat, flour, rice and sugar, and nobody is selling anything," said Paul Mansour, owner of Crown Mills. "Whatever is already booked, there's a delay. For any new business, there's nothing in the market." "This will drag on and get very bad," he said. "If goods are delayed beyond a month, there's going to be a serious issue of stocks." — Reuters

## Syrian air force behind chemical attacks: Probe

**LONDON:** Syrian Arab Air Force pilots flying Sukhoi Su-22 military planes and a helicopter dropped bombs containing poisonous chlorine and sarin nerve gas on a village in the country's western Hama region in March 2017, a new team at the global chemical weapons watchdog concluded in its first report.

The special investigative unit was established by members of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in 2018 to identify perpetrators of illegal attacks. Until now the OPCW had only been authorized to say whether chemical attacks occurred, not who perpetrated them.

Officials in the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its military backer Russia have repeatedly denied using chemical weapons and accuse insurgents of staging attacks to implicate Syrian forces. Syria's mission to the United Nations in New York did not immediately respond to a request for comment and there was no immediate reaction from Damascus to the report. In Moscow the Russian Foreign Ministry did not

## Virus-hit Iran urges IMF to okay \$5bn loan

**TEHRAN:** Iranian President Hassan Rouhani urged the International Monetary Fund on Wednesday to give the sanctions-hit country a \$5 billion emergency loan to combat its novel coronavirus outbreak. The Islamic republic is battling one of the world's deadliest coronavirus outbreaks which it says has killed close to 4,000 people and infected more than 64,500.

There has been speculation abroad that the real number of deaths and infections could be higher.

Iran has said it needs what would be its first IMF loan in over half a century to continue fighting the virus. But its arch enemy the United States, which effectively holds a veto at the IMF, is reportedly set to block the loan, arguing Iran will use the funds for military purposes.

"I urge all international organisations to fulfil their duties," Rouhani said during a cabinet meeting.

"We are a member of the IMF...if there's going to be any discrimination between Iran and others in giving loans, neither we nor world opinion will

tolerate it." Iran announced on March 12 that it had requested the loan. The country has not received assistance from the IMF since a "standby credit" issued between 1960 and 1962, according to IMF figures.

According to the IMF's website, a Rapid Financial Instrument "is available to all member countries facing an urgent balance of payments need". "If they do not act on their duties in this difficult situation, the world will judge them in a different way," Rouhani said.

#### 'Maximum pressure'

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo charged in a recent interview that Iran would use any economic relief to pursue nuclear weapons and back Shiite militias in Iraq that the administration blames for a wave of attacks on bases used by US troops. "You see the way... the regime is treating their people in this time of enormous crisis. You see the way that they continue to spend money," Pompeo told conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt.

US President Donald Trump's administration has waged a campaign of "maximum pressure" on Iran since it withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal in 2018. It has since imposed wave after wave of crippling sanctions that target key sectors of Iran's economy such as oil sales and banking.

Iran has repeatedly called on the Trump administration to reverse its sanctions policy, which has been opposed even by some US allies, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic hit. — AFP

## International

# Chinese virus medics arrive in Nigeria despite protest

## South Africa's Ramaphosa defends WHO after Trump virus lashing

**ABUJA:** A group of Chinese medics on Wednesday arrived in Nigeria to help fight the coronavirus pandemic, despite angry criticism from health workers in the west African nation. The 15-strong team were greeted by senior officials on the tarmac at Abuja airport after flying in on a month-long deployment with a planeload of medical supplies.

China—where the first outbreak of the COVID-19 disease occurred—has dispatched medics and supplies across the globe in a soft power push to burnish its image. But the move to send help to Nigeria sparked an irate backlash from the country's biggest doctors' union.

On Sunday, the Nigerian Medical Association condemned the planned deployment as “a thing of embarrassment” to health workers fighting the disease in Africa's most populous country “under deplorable conditions”. “It is a great disservice to the morale of the long-suffering front-line health workforce if the government goes ahead to invite these Chinese doctors,” a statement said.

“The invitation demeans their sacrifices so far in this pandemic.” Officials insist the Chinese team will help advise local authorities on handling the pandemic. Nigeria—which has so far

recorded 254 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and six deaths—is seen as highly vulnerable to the spread of the virus due to its weak healthcare system and high population density.

The country has already received medical supplies, including masks, gowns and testing kits from China's richest man Jack Ma. Those deliveries, too, have been met with some suspicion.

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control was forced last week to deny widespread rumours that equipment from China was contaminated with the novel coronavirus.

Meanwhile, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has thrown his support behind the WHO after it came under stinging attack from US leader Donald Trump over its handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

A statement from Ramaphosa's office late Wednesday said he “reaffirms his appreciation for the exceptional leadership” of World Health Organization (WHO) chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, “from the very earliest stages of this unprecedented global health crisis”. Ramaphosa was speaking in his capacity as the current leader of the African Union (AU). On Tuesday, Trump threatened to withhold US funding to the WHO, of which the United States



**ABUJA:** A man wearing a face mask holds a welcome sign at the Nnamdi Azikwe International Airport in Abuja, on Wednesday as a team of Chinese medics arrived in Nigeria to help fight the coronavirus pandemic, despite angry criticism from health workers in the west African nation. — AFP

is the largest funder.

Trump accused the WHO of having “called it wrong” and months too late, while taking US money but favoring China.

“The WHO really blew it,” Trump wrote on Twitter “For some reason, funded largely by the United States, yet very China centric. We will be giving that a good look.” — AFP

## UN searching for new Libya envoy after US blockage

**UNITED NATIONS:** UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has begun searching for a new envoy to Libya, diplomatic sources said Wednesday, after the United States refused to endorse the previous candidate.

Former Algerian foreign minister Ramtane Lamamra seemed to be all but confirmed in early March. But the US increasingly posed “questions” about his candidacy, even though “everyone else” supported him, a diplomat said.

Wednesday, during a closed-door meeting on Libya, a UN official told the Security Council that Guterres had launched a search for a new candidate, another source said.

Guterres “is working hard to make a proposal,” the source said on condition of anonymity.

The US mission to the UN gave no further explanation for opposing Lamamra, 67, who served as Algeria's foreign minister from 2013 to 2017 and as African Union commissioner for peace and security from 2008 to 2013.

He is considered an experienced diplomat and has been a mediator in several African conflicts, notably in Liberia.

Among the reasons proposed by some diplomats was the pressure on Washington from Egypt and the UAE, who back strongman Khalifa Haftar and considered Lamamra to be too close to the UN-recognized Government of National Accord. — AFP

## Sudan's Bashir, strongman turned inmate

**KHARTOUM:** Since his ouster last year, Sudan's veteran leader Omar Al-Bashir has been detained and convicted of corruption, becoming the Middle East's latest fallen strongman.

The 76-year-old, held in Khartoum's Kober prison where many of his opponents were detained during his rule, had ruthlessly crushed dissent after his rise to power in a 1989 Islamist-backed coup.

For three decades, he tenaciously held onto power through several bouts of protests, even after the 2011 Arab Spring revolts that toppled Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Bashir's fate, however, was sealed after his own military reacted to mounting popular anger and ousted him in April last year after months of street demonstrations. He was handed a two-year sentence over corruption charges in December and faces separate charges over the deaths of protesters and the 1989 coup that brought him to power.

An appeals court upheld the sentence on Wednesday. The former leader has also been indicted by the International Criminal Court



**KHARTOUM:** In this file photo taken on April 19, 2019, a Sudanese protester flashes a victory sign in front of a banner depicting ousted and detained president Omar Al-Bashir, during a protest outside the army headquarters in the capital Khartoum. — AFP

(ICC) in The Hague over war crimes and genocide in the war-ravaged Darfur region of western Sudan. One of Africa's longest-serving presidents, Bashir showed many different faces during his 30 years at the helm.

Known for his trademark dancing and waving of a cane before addressing loyalists, Bashir had remained defiant in the face of growing street protests before his overthrow. He long proved himself a political survivor, evading not only the ICC but also a myriad of domestic challenges ranging from economic misery to bloody internal conflicts.

Bashir was indicted by the ICC over the Darfur conflict that erupted in 2003 when

ethnic minority rebels took up arms against his Arab-dominated government, accusing it of political and economic marginalization of their region. The United Nations estimates around 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million others displaced in the conflict.

Human rights groups say Khartoum targeted suspected pro-rebel ethnic groups with a scorched earth policy, raping, killing, looting and burning villages. Bashir openly defied the ICC, travelling overseas within Africa and further afield to countries including Russia and China and winning re-election in 2010 and 2015 in polls boycotted by opposition groups. — AFP

## International

# Polish healthcare workers celebrate Easter without families in Germany

## Heartbreaking dilemma: Return to safety in Poland or staff medical frontline in Germany

**BERLIN:** For the first time in his life, Andrzej Zebrowski will not celebrate Easter with his family. Instead, the Polish surgeon will spend the holiday this year in the German hospital where he works to help his colleagues cope with the coronavirus crisis.

Like many others, Zebrowski found himself faced with a heartbreaking dilemma when the Polish government announced on March 27 that anyone entering the country would be placed in mandatory 14-day quarantine. Return to safety and comfort in Poland, or staff the medical front line in Germany? It was a tough decision, and even tougher to tell his family.

According to local media, 300,000 Poles provide healthcare in Europe's biggest economy—some as doctors and nurses in hospitals, others as carers for the elderly.

"Our main task as doctors is to take care of patients professionally... I could not let my staff down at this crucial moment," said Zebrowski, who works in Prenzlau, 30 kilometres (20 miles) from the border.

Zebrowski had been making the 50-minute journey every day from his home in Szczecin.

"Of course being separated from my family is not easy, but my wife and seven-year-old son understand and accept my decision," he said. "It is an exceptional situation."

### Financial incentives

Polish healthcare staff account for a fraction of the 69,000 workers who commute across the border every day. But without them, German hospitals would

have a problem on their hands. In some hospitals near the border, Poles comprise more than 30 percent of the workforce, according to Frank Ullrich Schulz, president of the regional medical association in the German state of Brandenburg.

To encourage Polish commuters to stay in Germany, some border regions are offering 40 to 65 euros (\$44-70) a day to pay for meals and hotel rooms. At the Prenzlau hospital, around half of the staff are Polish, including 22 doctors. The hospital has no COVID-19 patients yet, but intensive care beds are ready and waiting.

"Without them, many urgently needed procedures and operations could not be carried out," said hospital director Marita Schoenemann. Germany appears to be faring better than many neighbors against COVID-19. The country has been lauded for its comprehensive approach to testing and as of yesterday, the official death count was just over 2,100.

### Returning to family

"Of our 40 intensive care beds, only three are currently occupied. But we are bracing for a wave," said Ulrich Gnauk, director of the Asklepios hospital in border-town Schwedt, where half of the 40 Polish staff members have decided to stay.

Without them, the hospital would have had to close, said Gauk, who believes Europe has "failed" by not imposing blanket rules. Germany will introduce a 14-day quarantine period for anyone entering from April 10, with an exception for



**BERLIN:** Polish health-workers are faced with a heartbreaking dilemma when the Polish government announced on March 27 that anyone entering the country would be placed in mandatory 14-day quarantine. Return to safety and comfort in Poland, or staff the medical front line in Germany?

cross-border commuters.

Many healthcare workers have nonetheless decided to return to their families.

"I didn't want to force my entire family into quarantine over Easter because of me," said Jacek Witkowski, a doctor in the intensive care unit at Magdeburg University Hospital.

At the end of March, with Poland much less af-

ected by the coronavirus than Germany, he decided to return to Szczecin. The temporary employment agency that had placed him in the hospital refused to pay him during his 14 days of absence, forcing him to stop working for them.

"I'm disappointed... but I'm going to rest for a few days before looking for a job, probably in Poland," he said. —AFP

## Global leaders call to form task force to fight COVID-19

A 165-strong international group including 92 former Presidents and Prime Ministers, along with current economic and health leaders in the developed and developing world have come together to demand the creation of a G20 executive task force and an immediate global pledging conference which would approve and co-ordinate a multi-billion dollar coronavirus fighting fund.

In an open letter addressed to G20 leaders the group - which wants both to speed up the search for a vaccine, cure and treatments and revive the global economy - urges global collaboration and commitment to funding 'far beyond the current capacity of our existing international institutions'.

"The economic emergency will not be resolved until the health emergency is addressed: the health emergency will not end simply by conquering the disease in one country alone but by ensuring recovery from COVID-19 in all countries," the statement says.

### The plea is for agreement within days for:

- \$8 billion to rapidly hasten the global effort for vaccines, cure and treatment;
- \$35 billion to support health systems, from ventilators to test kits and protective equipment for health workers;
- And \$150 billion for developing countries to fight the medical and economic crisis, prevent a second wave of the disease flowing back into countries as they come out of the first wave. This means waiving debt interest payments for the poorest countries, including \$44 billion due this year from Africa. A \$500-\$600 billion issue of additional resources by the IMF in the form of special drawing rights is proposed."

The letter also urges the co-ordination of fiscal stimuli to avoid a recession becoming a depression.

While welcoming the G20's first communique on the Covid-19 crisis, the 165-strong group are pressing the G20 to speed up an action plan.

The group states: "All health systems - even the most sophisticated and best funded - are buckling under the pressures of the virus. Yet if we do nothing as the disease spreads in poorer African, Asian and Latin American cities which have little testing equipment, hardly any ventilators, and few medical supplies; and where social distancing and even washing hands are difficult to achieve, Covid-19 will persist there - and re-

emerge to hit the rest of the world with further rounds that will prolong the crisis. "World leaders must immediately agree to commit \$8 billion - as set out by the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board - to fill the most urgent gaps in the COVID-19 response. This includes \$1 billion this year for WHO, \$3 billion for vaccines and \$2.25 billion for therapeutics.

"Instead of each country, or state or province within it, competing for a share of the existing capacity, with the risk of rapidly-increasing prices, we should also be vastly increasing capacity by supporting the WHO in coordinating the global production and procurement of medical supplies, such as testing kits, personal protection equipment, and ITU technology to meet fully the world-wide demand. We will also need to stockpile and distribute essential equipment.

"\$35 billion will be required, as highlighted by WHO, to support countries with weaker health systems and especially vulnerable populations, including the provision of vital medical supplies, surge support to the national health workforce (70 percent of whom in many countries are underpaid women) and strengthening national resilience and preparedness.

"According to WHO, almost 30 percent of countries have no COVID-19 national preparedness response plans and only half have a national

infection prevention and control program. Health systems in lower income countries will struggle to cope: even the most optimistic estimates from Imperial College London suggest there will be 900,000 deaths in Asia and 300,000 in Africa.

"We propose convening a global pledging conference - its purpose supported by a G20 Executive Task Force - to commit resources to meeting these emergency global health needs."

On the Global Economic outlook, the group propose a range of measures and state: "Much has been done by national governments to counter the downward slide of their economies. But a global economic problem requires a global economic response. Our aim should be to prevent a liquidity crisis turning into a solvency crisis, and a global recession becoming a global depression. To ensure this, better coordinated fiscal, monetary, central bank, and anti-protectionist initiatives are needed. The ambitious fiscal stimuli of some countries will be all-the-more effective if more strongly complemented by all countries in a position to do so.

"The long term solution is a radical rethink of global public health and a refashioning - together with proper resourcing - of the entwined global health and financial architecture. "The UN, the G20 and interested partners should work together to co-ordinate further action."

## International

# Biden-Trump showdown looms after Sanders ends presidential bid

## 'I have concluded that this battle for Democratic nomination will not be successful'

**WASHINGTON:** Leftist US Senator Bernie Sanders suspended his presidential campaign Wednesday, clearing the way for rival Joe Biden to secure the Democratic nomination and challenge Donald Trump in November.

The feisty 78-year-old democratic socialist shook up the 2020 race with his relentless pursuit of "economic justice" for all Americans and a demand for universal health care. But he acknowledged his campaign had fallen short, as party voters determined Biden would be a stronger candidate to go up against Trump in the general election. "I have concluded that this battle for the Democratic nomination will not be successful," Sanders told supporters in a livestream from his home, where he has remained for the bulk of the coronavirus pandemic that put all in-person campaigning on hold.

"Vice president Biden will be the nominee," he said, adding that he congratulated his rival, a "very decent man, who I will work with to move our progressive ideas forward."

Sanders, who challenged Hillary Clinton for the party's nomination in 2016, mounted a formidable 2020 bid. He raised astonishing amounts of money from record numbers of donors, becoming the frontrunner early this year and earning the most votes in the first three state-wide contests.

But he was eclipsed by a surging Biden, who won the vast majority of remaining primaries and

now holds a commanding lead in the all-important race for delegates who choose the nominee.

Sanders brought his liberal ideological platform — including a call for universal health care and a \$15 hourly minimum wage — into the mainstream.

"Together we have transformed American consciousness as to what kind of nation we can become, and have taken this country a major step forward in the never-ending struggle for economic justice," Sanders said.

Several lawmakers have come out in support of his policies, and Biden has shifted leftward to incorporate some Sanders positions, although he does not support Sanders's Medicare for All plan.

### Biden seeks party unity

Biden immediately hailed Sanders as "a good man, a great leader, and one of the most powerful voices for change in our country."

He urged Sanders supporters to join his campaign, which already has the backing of nearly all other ex-rivals in the race including senators Kamala Harris and Amy Klobuchar, and former Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg. "I see you, I hear you, and I understand the urgency of what it is we have to get done in this country," Biden said in a statement to Sanders and his supporters.

"I hope you will join us. You are more than welcome. You're needed." Trump made his own pitch for Sanders's supporters, though in a more abrasive



**WASHINGTON:** File photo Democratic presidential hopefuls former US vice president Joe Biden (L) and Senator Bernie Sanders greet each other with a safe elbow bump before the start of the 11th Democratic Party 2020 presidential debate in a CNN Washington Bureau studio in Washington, DC on March 15, 2020. US Senator Bernie Sanders has suspended his presidential campaign, his team said yesterday. —AFP

tone. "Bernie Sanders is OUT!" the president posted on Twitter. "The Bernie people should come to the Republican Party, TRADE!" Trump said.

Trump won the 2016 election with help from disaffected working-class voters who believed they were being left behind by politicians in Washington. Sanders also appeals to those voters. He said he would not remain in an unwinnable campaign that

would "interfere" with important anti-coronavirus work while the country is gripped by crisis.

Biden said his focus is on ending the pandemic, but promised to continue campaigning despite the logistical challenges. "First things first: how we're going to keep America safe and get this crisis under control and provide economic assistance," he said during a virtual fundraiser. —AFP

## Coronavirus adds to struggles in City of God favela

**RIO DE JANEIRO:** There are no good options these days in City of God. Venture out in this densely populated Rio de Janeiro favela, and residents risk exposing themselves to coronavirus.

Stay in, and many have nothing to eat. The Brazilian slum rose to fame in 2002, when an acclaimed film of the same name chronicled the violence, crime and stark choices facing young people growing up on its streets.

"If you run, the beast will get you. If you stay, the beast will eat you," went the film's tagline. It could just as well apply to the era of COVID-19. Like 40 percent of Brazil's labor force, people in favelas tend to work in the informal sector, the kind of jobs that become impossible under the stay-at-home measures adopted to slow the spread of the new coronavirus. "A lot of them are self-employed. They style hair, give manicures, collect cans to recycle, guard people's cars, sell things at the beach," says Samantha Messiades, founder of a charitable organization called Ligacao Cultural (Cultural Connection). "All these people have lost their income. And they urgently need help," she says, wearing a pink face mask as she watches workers hand out food to needy residents in the slum of 37,000 people. —AFP

## Pandemic gives shot in the arm to Cuba's medical missions

**HAVANA:** Cuban doctors are back in global demand as overwhelmed national health care services tap their crisis experience as they battle with the coronavirus pandemic. Communist-run Havana has long used its "white coat diplomacy" as an arm of its foreign policy but has fallen foul of a changing political landscape in right-leaning Latin America and the Trump White House in Washington. But with the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the world, Cuba's doctors are seen as a key resource for overwhelmed national health care systems. "We have been talking about the possibility of a pandemic since the beginning of the century, and Cuba has its army of white coats prepared," said Arturo Lopez-Levy, a Cuban professor at Holy Names University in California. The ideals of the Cuban revolution of the 1950s mean free health care and education have long been considered societal pillars of the socialist island. "At the end of the Cold War, Cuba developed this capacity and therefore it's logical that it became a very important tool in its foreign policy," Lopez-Levy told AFP.

### Doctors to 14 nations

Italy, with more than 17,000 COVID-19 deaths, is one of 14 nations that so far have called on Cuba to help out their beleaguered health care systems. Havana sent its Henry Reeve humanitarian brigade, named after an American combatant in Cuba's war of independence, that specializes in natural disasters and epidemics. Their arrival was greeted with applause as they filed into an Italian airport. Havana sent a 39-strong team of medics to Andorra

after the principality reported that scores of its own doctors were quarantined. Cuba has also sent teams to Venezuela, Nicaragua, Grenada, Suriname, Jamaica and Belize. And France has now authorized Cuban doctors to work in some of its overseas territories in order to fill the gaps in hard-hit local health care systems. "The coronavirus has provided Cuba with a new opportunity to export medical services," said Jorge Duany, head of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University.

### Washington target

Cuba earned \$6.3 billion from its medical program in 2018. But since then, revenues have taken a hit, with Latin America swinging back to the right, and Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and El Salvador all cutting contracts with Havana and sending the medical brigades home.

Cuba, which has suffered almost six decades of crippling US sanctions, blames Washington for campaigning to discredit an initiative that has sent more than 400,000 health workers to 164 countries.

The US accuses the Cuban government of exploiting the medics program for cash, saying 75 percent of their salary is withheld by Havana in a modern-day form of "slavery".

And US ally Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro, who kicked out 8,000 Cuban health workers last year, accused Havana of using the program to plant intelligence agents in the country.

"#Cuba offers its international medical missions to those afflicted with #COVID-19 only to make up the money it lost when countries stopped participating in the abusive program," the US State Department said on Twitter two weeks ago. Host countries seeking Cuba's help over the pandemic "should scrutinize agreements and end labor abuses," it warned.

Still, the program survives. As of last month, Havana still had 28,729 healthworkers posted in 59 countries. "Under the US policy of maximum economic pressure on Cuba, the rejection of the medical program could be interpreted as another strategy to deprive the Cuban government of material resources," said Duany. —AFP

## International

# Coronavirus was spreading in NYC in February, came via Europe: Scientist

## 'There was a focus on shopping travel from China'

**WASHINGTON:** The novel coronavirus began spreading in New York City in February, before widespread testing began, and the strain so far identified in local samples came from Europe, a scientist said Wednesday.

Adriana Heguy, a geneticist at NYU Grossman School of Medicine who led the research, told AFP that tracing back the virus' chain of transmission will help policy makers make better informed social interventions in the future. "It's very interesting that so far, the majority seem to be coming from Europe, and this is in part I think because there was a focus on stopping travel from China," she said.

The findings also tie in with a spate of mysterious pneumonia cases that New York physicians were treating before large scale testing began in the city, she added. Heguy and her team determined the viral sequences of 75 samples taken from the nasal swabs of patients at Tisch Hospital, NYU Winthrop Hospital and NYU Langone Hospital Brooklyn. All organisms mutate over time, but so-called RNA viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 introduce errors in each cycle of their replication. This is the reason why influenza viruses are so different

from season to season and require new vaccines. While the new coronavirus doesn't seem to mutate as fast as the flu, there are enough changes for scientists to trace back its ancestry, much like a person's DNA can be traced back to their parents and grandparents.

To do this, the New York team uploaded the samples they had taken to a server run by the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID EpiFlu) where scientists from around the world share data. The first patient they studied had no relevant travel history, meaning he had been infected by someone in their community.

"By the specific changes that had occurred in his virus, we could tell basically, with a high degree of probability that it was coming from England," said Heguy.

Beyond determining transmission pathways, there could be clinical implications in continuing to gather more data. For example, scientists will eventually seek to learn whether some strains lead to less or more serious forms of the disease than others, and this could inform targeted treatments.

Another potential use will come as countries go



**NEW YORK:** Medical staff outside NYC Health + Hospitals-Gotham Health of East New York at a COVID-19 screening area on Wednesday in the Brooklyn borough of New York City. — AFP

back to work and lift lockdown restrictions—as China and South Korea are starting to do. If, as scientists suspect, the virus is seasonal and returns in a smaller second wave, they can immediately sequence its genome from infected patients, then take samples from the neighborhood where they live to

determine if there is a community outbreak.

This in turn can help more targeted social interventions. The team is in the early stages of their project but hopes to soon sequence nearly 200 samples per week with the goal of offering thousands of genomes for analysis. —AFP

## Johnson stable as lockdown extension looms

**LONDON:** British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday began a fourth day in intensive care "improving" in his battle with coronavirus, as his government prepared to extend a nationwide lockdown introduced last month. Johnson is the most high-profile world leader to become infected with COVID-19 and his transfer to intensive care on Monday is unprecedented for a prime minister during a national emergency in modern times.

"He's stable, improving, sat up and engaged with medical staff," Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden told BBC News. "I think things are getting better for him." The disease has struck at the heart of the British government, infected more than 60,000 people nationwide and killed over 7,000, with another record daily death toll of 938 reported on Wednesday. Senior ministers were set to discuss at yesterday's daily coronavirus response meeting the process for extending the stringent social distancing measures rolled out on March 23.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, who is deputizing for Johnson, will lead the so-called "war cabinet", as he has done since Monday. However, ministers have made it clear no announcement on the status of the lockdown-rolled out for an initial three weeks-would be made until that period has ended on Monday, at the earliest. The Sun news-

paper reported the government's top scientific advisers will not meet until today to assess the situation. "You shouldn't expect a decision today on restrictions," Dowden said, stressing the actual review would happen next week. "Right now it's just beginning to work," he said of the lockdown, noting new COVID-19 cases in Britain were not "accelerating". "When we have the opportunity to change it, we will, but that is not the moment now."

Johnson arrived in hospital on Sunday night following concerns he still had a cough and high temperature 10 days after being diagnosed with coronavirus. He had spent the previous nine days in self-isolation in a flat above his Downing Street office. The 55-year-old Conservative leader was transferred to intensive care on Monday night on the advice of his medical team as his condition was seen to be deteriorating. He has received messages of support from around the world, with US President Donald Trump sending best wishes to his "very good friend". Russian leader Vladimir Putin said Johnson's "energy, optimism and sense of humor" would see him through.

Experts have said it was not uncommon for COVID-19 patients to move to intensive care, but said it showed his condition was serious. The British government has been criticized for a slow response to the pandemic, initially refusing to follow other European countries in requiring people to stay home as the virus spread rapidly across the globe.

Johnson himself said in early March that he was still shaking hands with people-only for COVID-19 to sweep through the British establishment weeks later. Health Secretary Matt Hancock and the heir to the throne, Prince Charles, have both since been infected, although they have since recovered. —AFP

## Linda Tripp dead from cancer

**WASHINGTON:** Linda Tripp, the Pentagon publicist whose secret recordings of Monica Lewinsky talking about sex with president Bill Clinton led to his impeachment, died Wednesday at 70. Her former lawyer, Joseph Murtha, confirmed the death, and US media cited family members saying she died after a short battle with pancreatic cancer.

Tripp was a public affairs official of the US Department of Defense when her co-worker Lewinsky, who had served as a White House intern in the mid-1990s, told her she had secretly had sexual encounters with Clinton in the Oval Office. In conversations Tripp secretly recorded, Lewinsky said the two had had sex on numerous occasions and that she had saved a blue dress she wore during one that still had stains of Clinton's semen on it. Tripp then took the recordings to independent prosecutor Ken Starr, who used them to expand a separate investigation of Clinton.

Clinton at first denied the relationship, declaring from the White House: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."

But Tripp's recordings and the blue dress she urged Lewinsky to save as an "insurance policy" blew the case open. In 1998 Clinton ultimately was impeached by the House of Representatives and placed on trial in the Senate for lying and obstruction of justice. He was acquitted.

The affair made Tripp a villain to Democrats and Clinton supporters, but a minor hero to Republi-



cans. Tripp said in a 1999 interview, on the day of Clinton's acquittal, that she had no regrets despite having received numerous threats. "The public has no clue... absolutely no idea what Monica endured," she told NBC. "It was worth it to me to do what I considered to be my patriotic duty."

She was later forced from her job, in which she was a political appointee, when Clinton left office in January 2001.

After that she moved to Middleburg, Virginia where she operated a Christmas store, The Christmas Sleigh, with her second husband Dieter Rausch. Lewinsky, who made clear at the time that she felt deeply betrayed, tweeted earlier Wednesday about Tripp after news emerged that she was severely ill. "No matter the past, upon hearing that Linda Tripp is very seriously ill, I hope for her recovery. I can't imagine how difficult this is for her family." —AFP

## International

# Australian police take 'black box' off cruise ship in coronavirus homicide probe

## Hundreds of passengers tested positive for virus

**SYDNEY:** Australian police said yesterday they have taken the "black box" of a cruise ship which disembarked hundreds of passengers infected with the coronavirus in Sydney, as part of a homicide investigation into the country's deadliest infection source.

The investigation got underway as the Australian authorities said the rate of new coronavirus infections hit its lowest number in three weeks and began arranging more flights to bring home citizens stranded abroad.

The Ruby Princess cruise ship, owned by Carnival Corp, has become a flashpoint of public anger in Australia after authorities granted the ship permission to disembark its passengers last month without health checks.

Hundreds of the passengers later tested positive for the coronavirus and 15 have died, out of Australia's roughly 6,000 confirmed cases and 51 deaths.

Investigators boarded the ship at an industrial port south of Sydney, interviewed the captain and took electronic logs as evidence, New South Wales (NSW) state Police Commissioner Mick Fuller said.

"They spoke to the captain of the ship, who was extremely helpful," Fuller said in a televised news conference yesterday. "Ships have a black box very similar to that of international planes, and that and other evidence has been seized for further investigation."

About 1,000 crew of various nationalities remain on board the ship. Globally, more than 1.5 million people have tested positive to the coronavirus, which has caused about 87,000 deaths.

In the past day, Australia recorded 96 new coronavirus infections, its first increase of less than 100 cases in three weeks, Health Minister Greg Hunt told reporters in Canberra. "The curve continues to flatten, we are consolidating the gains," Hunt said in a televised news conference.

"While we have been cautious over the last two weeks as we have seen the early data, what we're seeing now is a genuine consolidation."

Authorities are imploring people to stay home and cancel trips to traditional vacation spots over the long Easter holiday weekend and say tight restrictions on movement could stay in place for at least six months.

The restrictions include a broad order for people to stay home except for essential work or to exercise and buy food, and police have said they will use the threat of on-the-spot fines to stop people travelling or socialising over Easter.

"We can't lift our foot off the pedal, we need to stay vigilant, make sure we clamp down on the community-to-community transmission," NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian told reporters.

Berejiklian ordered a senior state lawmaker back to his Sydney home after he was photographed by local media at his beach house



Investigators prepare to board the Ruby Princess cruise ship at an industrial port south of Sydney.

outside the city.

The premier of the island state Tasmania, Peter Gutwein, said he would use helicopters and doorknocks of suspected holiday houses to monitor people's movements. "The gloves come off, we are going to police this, the period of education is over," he said.

Federal Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne said she had arranged with Qantas Airways Ltd

to run special flights to repatriate Australians stuck in foreign countries. The flights would carry people in Peru, Argentina and South Africa home in the next week, with flights also being planned from India and the Philippines.

Late on Wednesday, the federal government approved a package to subsidise the wages of six million people, or a quarter of the population, at a cost of A\$130 billion (\$81 billion). — Reuters

## Rockets hit US air base in Afghanistan

**KABUL:** Five rockets hit a U.S. air base in Afghanistan yesterday, but there were no casualties, two senior security officials said, and no militant group immediately claimed responsibility.

The attack comes as the Afghan government has launched the release of Taliban prisoners from a jail near the Bagram base, as part of a confidence-building step in a US-Taliban peace deal aimed at ending about two decades of war in Afghanistan.

"Five rockets were fired at Bagram airfield early this morning," the NATO-led mission, Resolute Support, said on Twitter. "There were no casualties or injuries." The rockets targeting the largest U.S. military compound in Afghanistan were fired from a vehicle parked in an adjoining

village. A hundred Taliban members are scheduled to be freed on Thursday from the detention facility near the base, following Wednesday's release of 100 members of the hardline Islamist group.

The prisoner exchange deal provides for the government to free 5,000 Taliban prisoners, with the Taliban releasing 1,000 members of the Afghan security forces in exchange. But the Taliban rebuffed the overture, saying they were unable to verify which prisoners had been released.

The Afghan government said it was committed to honour the deal but would not release senior Taliban commanders accused of carrying out some of the most brutal attacks in recent years. — Reuters

## Scores of detained Rohingya freed as virus fears mount

**PATHEIN:** Cases against scores of Rohingya Muslims detained after fleeing Myanmar's restive Rakhine state have been dropped, as fears grow of a potential coronavirus outbreak in the country's overcrowded prisons.

A military crackdown in 2017 forced some 750,000 Rohingya to escape to Bangladesh, where they languish in sprawling refugee cities. Those who remain in Rakhine live under tight restrictions with little access to healthcare and education, unable to move freely in conditions Amnesty International has branded "apartheid".

For years many have taken to boats and buses to escape. But in recent months hundreds have been caught and detained in prisons — charged with breaching immigration laws, offences which carry up to two years in jail.

On Wednesday a court suddenly dropped cases

against two of the largest groups of arrested Rohingya, totalling 128 people.

"Charges against both adults and children are withdrawn and they are to be released," judge Khin Myat Myat Htun told Pathein court in Ayeyarwady Region.

An AFP reporter confirmed four buses carrying the Rohingya and bound for Yangon left Pathein prison early Thursday morning. Scores more are set to be released by other courts and sent back to Rakhine, a Rohingya activist told AFP.

"In total about 250 Rohingya are likely to be sent back on Saturday," he said, asking not to be named for security reasons. It is unclear where the Rohingya will be taken in Rakhine and authorities have not yet given the reason for their sudden liberation.

Next week is Myanmar's New Year, however, when the president often grants amnesties to prisoners. With coronavirus fears gripping the country, calls have amplified for low-risk inmates to be released from what Human Rights Watch describes as Myanmar's "horribly overcrowded and unsanitary" jails.

The World Health Organization has warned prison populations are particularly vulnerable to the pandemic. The Rohingya garner little sympathy within Myanmar, where many people buy the official line they are illegal immigrants, even though many trace their roots in the country back generations. —AFP



## International

# Indian court order for free coronavirus testing may hinder fight: Experts

## India has 5,734 cases of coronavirus and 166 deaths from COVID-19

**NEW DELHI:** A decision by the Supreme Court of India to make testing for coronavirus free places an unfair financial burden on medical firms and could see a reduction in testing, already among the world's lowest, said business leaders and health experts.

The concern is that private medical firms, like many businesses in India are struggling financially, and could go under if they tested for free without financial assistance. Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, executive chairperson of Biocon Limited, one of India's biggest biotech firms, said private institutions could not be expected to operate on credit.

"Humanitarian in intent but impractical to implement - I fear testing will plummet," Shaw said on twitter yesterday about the court judgement. "These are small businesses they're providing testing at cost and not profiteering. How will they pay their employees?"

The top court, responding to a public interest petition, said on Wednesday private medical institutions should be playing a philanthropic role at a time of national crisis and it would not allow a situation where India's poor could not afford a test for the virus that is quickly spreading through the country.

It said the issue of reimbursing these laboratories for running the hundreds of thousands

of tests for novel coronavirus that the world's second most populous country urgently needs would be considered later on.

India has 5,734 cases of coronavirus and 166 deaths from COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus, according to the ministry of health and family welfare, reflecting a jump of 460 cases over Wednesday.

The numbers are small compared to the United States, Italy and Spain and one of the reasons is that the country is testing a narrow range of the population, doctors say. These include people who have travelled overseas, people in contact with them and are showing symptoms, health workers with symptoms, hospitalised patients with respiratory problems and those who came in contact with a confirmed patient.

On Wednesday, 13,143 samples were tested nationwide, the government-run Indian Council of Medical Research said, well behind the 20,000 people South Korea has been testing each day from its far smaller population.

### Derailing efforts

To beef up the infrastructure for screening, the government approved 56 laboratories for testing in addition to 136 government-run labs and set a price cap of 4,500 Indian rupees (\$59.13) for every test.

13,143  
samples  
tested  
nationwide



**MUMBAI:** Bombay Municipal Corporation workers stand outside an isolation centre being set up at the NSCI dome during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Mumbai yesterday. —AFP

The plan is to scale up to 20,000 tests in the next few days and eventually to 100,000 a day in the worse-case scenario. But the court decision threatens to derail the plan to widen testing, said Shamika Ravi, a former member of the Indian Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council and a health specialist. "We are going to have fewer and fewer testing, and that is a very big problem right now because that is our single focus, to increase the testing capacity across the country."

The health sector like others parts of the Indian economy is struggling and in no position

to offer a free ride, she said.

"There is a liquidity crunch in every business today, including diagnostics. People just don't have the liquidity to be able to undertake large, new exercises without any assurance," she said.

Of growing worry is India's financial capital Mumbai, which has reported 857 cases, the highest in the country including from its slums where even health workers are reluctant to go. "We are seeing more medical staff either getting infected or just not showing up at work," said a city health inspector. —Reuters

## As delivery workers emerge as frontline soldiers, India warms to e-commerce

**NEW DELHI:** Three days after India imposed a nationwide lockdown, Devender Singh revved up his motorcycle to deliver meat and eggs to customers - but his heart was in his mouth as he closed in on a police barricade on a deserted New Delhi road.

Beatings of delivery workers by overzealous police after Prime Minister Narendra Modi late last month suddenly imposed the world's biggest lockdown to contain the coronavirus had unnerved him. "That day, it felt like my time to get thrashed had come," Singh, 30, told Reuters on a quiet summer afternoon as he was out making deliveries.

"But what I was expecting didn't happen. The police were very friendly - they just asked me where I was going and why." Singh said he was allowed to proceed after he flashed a so-called movement pass authorised by the police and given to him by his employer Licious, an online meat store backed by Bertelsmann's venture capital arm and Silicon Valley's Mayfield Fund.

E-commerce is now limping back to life in India as the bor-

der closures, warehouse shutdowns and general confusion that initially accompanied the three-week shutdown order have eased. While still clearing a backlog of previously placed orders, most online retailers are accepting new orders, albeit with delayed deliveries and a limited product catalogue.

Moreover, political coldness towards e-commerce, which many in India see as a threat to millions of brick-and-mortar retailers, has faded. While grocery stores and pharmacies are still open, it has become evident that Singh and the thousands of delivery workers like him have become crucial frontline soldiers in the country's battle against the pandemic.

Highlighting that shift, two days into the lockdown, Trade Minister Piyush Goyal held a video conference with nearly two dozen e-commerce executives in a bid to understand hurdles faced by the sector.

That contrasts with Goyal's public snub of Amazon boss Jeff Bezos during his India visit in January, when he said the company wasn't doing a "great favour to India" by investing a billion dollars.

Amazon and its Walmart-controlled rival Flipkart have until now not had a warm welcome in India: New Delhi tweaked foreign investment rules, forcing the two companies to alter their structures, and anti-trust probes have been launched against them over allegations of deep discounts that hurt small businesses.

"While e-commerce companies are still somewhat struggling to fulfil deliveries, everyone - the government, customer, and Indian businesses - is fast realising that online retail cannot

be ignored anymore," said Satish Meena, a senior analyst at Forrester Research.

"I believe the government will now urgently streamline e-commerce regulations which will help ease processes and remove bottlenecks in the sector."

### Essential, just like doctors

Singh said his wife had been reluctant to let him go to work, fearing he might contract the virus, be assaulted by police or even have his new motorcycle confiscated.

But as the sole bread winner for his family of three, Singh had little choice. He delivers eight to 10 orders each day, down from about 20 when supplies and orders volumes were normal. Though, unlike in some countries where workers are paid per delivery, that doesn't mean a hit to his monthly wage of about 18,000 rupees (\$235).

Riding his motorcycle on empty roads, he reaches the delivery centre in an east Delhi neighbourhood within 10 minutes, half the time it used to take before the lockdown. All delivery workers sanitize their hands on entering the building, wear face masks and put on gloves before they thoroughly disinfect their carry bag. Stacking the neatly packed meat boxes in his bag, Singh leaves for customers' homes. As most apartment complexes in Delhi have barred delivery workers' entry, he calls customers to the gate to pick up their order placed atop his bag.

"In these times, we are also fulfilling an essential service just like doctors, nurses and police," Singh said from behind a face mask and a handkerchief with a smile in his eyes. —Reuters

## International

# China seeks to contain 'silent carriers' of coronavirus

## China report 56 new asymptomatic cases

**BEIJING:** China released new measures yesterday to try and prevent asymptomatic "silent carriers" of coronavirus from causing a second wave of infections, as the country reported another modest rise in new confirmed cases.

Mainland China reported 63 new confirmed cases on Wednesday, up from 62 a day earlier, the National Health Commission said. Of those, 61 were travellers arriving from overseas, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in China to 81,865.

While new infections have fallen from their peak in February after China locked down several cities and imposed strict travel restrictions, authorities have called for continued vigilance amid fears of a fresh wave of infections.

Aside from curbing an influx of infected travellers from abroad, China's other concern is managing asymptomatic people, or virus carriers who exhibit no clinical symptoms such as a fever or a cough.

China reported 56 new asymptomatic cases on Wednesday, bringing the total number of such cases to 657 since data for such infections were published daily from April 1. The State Council, or Cabinet, on Wednesday published new rules to manage asymptomatic coronavirus carriers, or what some state media described as "silent carriers" of the virus.

Under the regulations, medical institutions must report detection of asymptomatic cases

within two hours of their discovery. Local governments must then identify all known close contacts of the case within 24 hours.

Asymptomatic patients will be quarantined collectively for 14 days, and will be counted as confirmed cases if they start to show symptoms. People who have had close contact with them must also be quarantined for two weeks.

Earlier this week, a new function appeared on Tencent's ubiquitous WeChat mobile platform allowing people to check if they have ever sat on trains and planes near an asymptomatic carrier who later became a confirmed case.

The heightened sense of caution came as restrictions on outbound movement of people from Wuhan, capital of central

Hubei province and epicentre of the outbreak in China, were lifted on Wednesday after a virtual lockdown of over two months.

Wuhan saw 221 incoming and outgoing flights on Wednesday, with 7,119 passengers flying out and 4,595 arriving, according to Sun Shaohua, an official at the Civil Aviation Administration of China. The top three destinations for outgoing flights were the cities of Chengdu, Haikou and Shenzhen, said Sun.

State media Xinhua reported that Wuhan's public transport passenger volume exceeded 620,000 as of 5pm on Wednesday, citing the city's transport department.

### Suifenghe building a makeshift hospital



**WUHAN:** Security personnel walk inside a field hospital that had offered beds for coronavirus patients during the height of the crisis in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province yesterday. Thousands of relieved citizens streamed out of China's Wuhan after authorities lifted months of lockdown. —AFP

### Makeshift hospital

Of the 61 new confirmed cases arriving from overseas, 40 came from China's northeast Heilongjiang province, which shares a border with Russia, all of which were returning Chinese nationals, reported Xinhua.

The province's Suifenghe city is building a makeshift hospital as imported cases from Russia continue to rise, reported state-controlled tabloid Global Times on Thursday, as all of the city's isolation hotels were full. Suifenghe has closed its borders to all arrivals and implemented restrictions on the movement of its citizens on Wednesday, similar to measures seen in Wuhan.

Wuhan, a megacity of 11 million people in the middle reaches of the Yangtze river, still sees tens of new cases of asymptomatic carriers each day. Hubei's health authority has reported 303 new asymptomatic cases since it began publishing data for such cases on April 1, but only two asymptomatic patients in Wuhan were reported to have developed symptoms and become confirmed case in the same timeframe. Mainland China has reported 657 new asymptomatic cases so far this month. Of those, it said 57 have developed symptoms. Chinese health authorities said earlier in April that around two-thirds of the asymptomatic patients will later develop symptoms. — Reuters

## Indonesian barber gears up to groom during coronavirus

**BOGOR:** Indonesian hair stylist Herman Maulanasyah knows that he may look comical in his makeshift protective gear but he sees that as a small price if it helps protect him and his customers from the novel coronavirus.

Clad in a plastic sheet held together with tape, a ski mask, a gas mask and latex gloves, Maulanasyah, 40, welcomes customers at his salon in the city of Bogor, south of Jakarta, even as the virus spreads across the country.

"Please don't judge, I'm not making it for fun or to look ridiculous, this is how I show my appreciation to the health workers," Maulanasyah told Reuters at the salon he has run for 15 years.

Before he starts cutting hair, Maulanasyah sprays his protective gear and his customers' hands with sanitizer. He has worn the gear for the past two weeks as part of efforts to cut the risks from the respiratory disease caused by the coro-

navirus that has killed at least 240 people and infected nearly 3,000 in the world's fourth most populous country.

Health workers in Indonesia have paid a high price, with at least 24 doctors dying from the disease, according to the Indonesian Doctors Association. In Jakarta, 130 medical workers have been infected, according to the city government said.

Jakarta has ordered businesses and schools to close in a bid to contain the virus and it plans large-scale social restrictions enforced by security personnel.

Though Maulanasyah's salon is outside Jakarta, where many of the cases in the country have been clustered, his income has dwindled from about 500,000 rupiah (\$31) a day to 100,000 rupiah (\$6.20).

Customer Abdul Rahman Fattah said he felt safer having his hair cut this way but conceded that the cumbersome outfit worn by Maulanasyah meant the result may not always be perfect.

As another precautionary measure, Maulanasyah allows only four people in the salon and urges everyone to keep their distance. "This is to protect myself because I have a family, my child and wife, therefore I need to ensure my safety at work because I don't know whether the people who come here are infected or not," he said. — Reuters

## N Zealand orders quarantine for returning citizens

**SYDNEY:** New Zealand will begin moving citizens to compulsory quarantine from today as they return from overseas, stepping up its efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus halfway through a four-week nationwide lockdown.

The shutdown began in late March in the Pacific nation of about 5 million, and a state of national emergency was declared to stifle local transmissions of the respiratory disease.

"No one goes home, everyone goes into a managed facility," Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said, adding that 14 days spent in a government-approved facility would be a prerequisite for all foreign travellers.

"Even one person slipping through the cracks and bringing the virus in can see an explosion in cases, as we have observed with some of our bigger clusters," she told a media

briefing in Wellington on Thursday.

Ardern added that her cabinet would decide whether to extend the nationwide curbs on April 20, two days before the lockdown is set to end.

The lockdown has reduced domestic transmissions, authorities said, with a steady fall this week in the daily rise in infections.

The tally of infections rose by 29 to stand at 1,239 on Thursday, for the lowest daily rise since March 21, a sign the epidemic could be on the retreat since the lockdown began 15 days ago. Overnight, 35 people were declared to have recovered.

New Zealand, like neighbouring Australia, has fewer infections than many countries and the pace of infections in both nations has slowed dramatically in the past week.

Despite some signs of a plateau in infections, the government said it had no plans to relax the curbs over the Easter weekend and warned of hefty fines for non-essential travel then.

Police will step up activity around holiday spots during the Easter holidays, authorities said, with some roadblocks planned. Interactive graphic tracking global spread of coronavirus. — Reuters

# Friday Times Lifestyle

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A coronavirus-themed made car to be used in a awareness campaign is pictured during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Hyderabad. — AFP

## Indian inventor revs up corona car to drive home lockdown message

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## Lifestyle | Features



A horse-drawn carriage turns at an intersection in the 3rd district in Vienna, Austria.—AFP Photos



A horse-drawn carriage driver stands with a meal package from fiaker in the 3rd district in Vienna.

## Vienna's horse-drawn carriages ride again — for food delivery

Vienna's horse-drawn carriages, a staple of street life in the Austrian capital and a popular tourist attraction, have been sidelined by the coronavirus pandemic — so they are now helping deliver food to the elderly. The carriages, or “Fiaker” as they are called in Vienna, are taking part in a food delivery scheme in one of the city's central districts set up by the InterContinental Hotel, itself severely hit by lockdown measures taken to halt the spread of the virus. Instead of catering to guests, the hotel's kitchens have been turning out 200-300 meals a day for senior citizens in the area.

Deliveries are made by volunteers using all manner of vehicles — including by part-time “Fiaker” driver Christian Gerzabek. Despite business coming to a standstill, “the horses still have to be moved, they want to get out after the winter,” he says. “I thought that we should combine that.. with doing something good for people who need it,” he told AFP. The scheme has been a lifeline for its elderly beneficiaries. One of them, Anneliese Nebenfuhr, said she thought the deliveries were “wonderful”. “I told the gentleman on the phone to give a kiss to the whole team,” she said.

InterContinental general director Brigitte Trattner said carriage drivers were the first to respond to a call for delivery volunteers, with car drivers and cyclists also signing up. De-



General manager of the Hotel Intercontinental, Brigitte Trattner, provides food packages to be picked up in Vienna.

scribing the InterContinental Vienna as an intrinsic part of Vienna's third district, Trattner said that when the coronavirus crisis broke “we naturally thought: Is there anyway we can help?” The hotel plans to run the project until Monday, and after that Trattner says meals would be distributed to staff at the Rudolfstiftung hospital, which is also nearby. —AFP



A horse-drawn carriage drives in the front of Hotel Intercontinental in the 3rd district in Vienna.



A horse-drawn carriage waits in front of the Hotel Intercontinental in the 3rd district in Vienna.

## Locked-down Brits seek creature comfort

Stranded at home, Britons have sought solace in their traditional passion for animals, with shelters recording a wave of applications to adopt dogs and cats. The famous shelter at Battersea in south London saw 86 dogs and 69 cats leave in the week before the government announced its coronavirus lockdown, more than double the number at this time last year, leading to warnings against impulsive adoptions. “We are a country of animal lovers and I think people recognize the situation we find ourselves in is exceptional,” said Steve Craddock, Centre Manager at Battersea.

While all three Battersea centers have closed since the lockdown, “people continue to apply for adoption online,” he said. “We haven't seen an increase of animals being abandoned which is encouraging,” he added. The Kennel Club, the world-renowned British dog association, has also noted a “surge” in interest. Puppy searches on its website increased by 53 percent between February and March, with a peak in the week before the confinement measures. Labradors, cocker spaniels and golden retrievers led the searches, all breeds popular with families. “There is an enormous surge,” Bill Lambert, head of health and well-being at the Kennel Club, told AFP. “People spend more time at home and are thinking that now they could actually have a dog,” he added.

### ‘Calm to household’

But the club warned against “impulsive” decisions to take on new pets. “People are making decisions about what is happening right now but they might go back to work and their situation might change,” said Lambert. “There is a big risk with getting a puppy now when you've got lot of time on your hands, the puppy will spend lots of time with you and suddenly the puppy's routine will change and the puppy will be left on its own,” he added. “Puppies, and even older dogs should not be left for long periods of time.”

However, he highlighted the benefits of having a pet in times of anxiety and isolation, such as pandemics. “Dogs are a good way to reduce your blood pressure, dogs bring calm to a household, they give people something to focus on, particularly in these terrible times... particularly for people living alone,” said Lambert. The British have not only stocked up on toilet paper, but on treats for their pets. Pet shops, which are on the list of shops allowed to stay open, are experiencing record sales.

The Pets At Home chain revealed “exceptional levels of demand”, both in-store and online as the COVID-19 crisis has developed, but warned in a news release that its financial outlook for the year 2020/2021 remained uncertain. Shopping for dogs, however, is more complicated due to the pandemic restrictions. Bill Lambert believes this could be a blessing, forcing potential owners to wait until the crisis is over before making up their mind. “What we are hoping is that there is a good possibility that some people who are working from home will find a way to work from home far more frequently when the lockdown comes to an end,” he said, leading to fewer lonely pups. —AFP



Inventor Sudhakar Yadav gestures next to his coronavirus-themed made car to be used in a awareness campaign, during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Hyderabad. —AFP



People follow to take photos as inventor Sudhakar Yadav (inside) leads his coronavirus-themed made car.

## Indian inventor revs up corona car to drive home lockdown message

A giant coronavirus is stalking the streets of southern India — propelled by a 100 cc engine and an inventor trying to drive home the message that Indians should stay indoors as the pandemic sweeps across the world. Sudhakar Yadav's wacky small single-seater car — made of fluorescent-green fibre and complete with the red crown-like spikes of the virus — has been racking up the miles in the tech hub of Hyderabad to remind fellow citizens of the dangers of COVID-19. "People are not scared and are still... on the streets despite the clear danger," the 67-year-old Yadav, who runs a printing business, told AFP. "My message through the car art is to make them understand that it is dangerous to be out on the streets and the safest place right now is the home."

Yadav says he was inspired by virus-shaped helmets worn by police elsewhere in India as they try to inject some light-heartedness into their enforcement of a crippling 21-day national lockdown. In the tech-hub of Bangalore, officers

wearing red and green coronavirus helmets danced around drivers ignoring quarantine, while their colleagues blew horns and banged gongs to simulate a virus attack. In the southern city of Chennai, police inspector Rajesh Babu joined with a local artist to design a helmet with red spikes and bulbs to shock drivers there. Yadav the inventor — who holds a Guinness World Record for designing the world's largest tricycle — said the Hyderabad police had been "supportive" of his journey.

"They want the car to be showcased to create awareness," he told AFP, adding he planned to donate the vehicle to local authorities to maximize its use during the lockdown. Yadav has been designing quirky art pieces for almost five decades, including cars shaped as a burger, cricket ball and a computer. He also took motorbike engines, encased them in cigarette and condom-shaped fibre frames and drove them around Hyderabad to raise awareness about cancer and safe sex.—AFP



Police officers patrol as inventor Sudhakar Yadav (inside) leads his coronavirus-themed made car on a road for an awareness campaign.

## Bali's miracle: Turning wine into hand sanitizer

Pharmacists on the Indonesian holiday island of Bali are tackling a shortage of anti-coronavirus hand sanitizer by making their own unique, tropical version — from thousands of litres of fermented palm wine. The idea was the brainchild of Bali police chief Petrus Reinhard Golose, who says he was alarmed that supplies of alcohol-based disinfectant were in short supply while prices soared for what was left on the market. He rustled up some 4,000 litres of the popular, potent beverage — known as arak — by asking local manufacturers to donate from their stocks, with the force also dipping into its own funds to buy up extra supplies.

Staff at Bali's Udayana University were then tasked with turning the wine into a handwash that could protect against the coronavirus. Within a week, they had managed to produce a disinfectant with a 96 percent alcohol content to meet WHO standards, according to the university. Some clove and mint oil were added to the mixture to reduce hand irritation. "So far we've produced 10,600 bottles of hand sanitiser using arak and Bali police have given them out to people in need," Dewa Ayu Swastini, head of the university's pharmaceutical faculty, told AFP on Wednesday. Bali has reported 49 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and 2 deaths.—AFP



This handout photo shows a policeman (center) and Udayana University researcher making hand sanitizer from donated palm wine, known locally as arak, in Denpasar.—AFP

## Lifestyle | Features

## Sitcom with 'heart': 'Modern Family' bids farewell after 11 seasons

The end of "Modern Family" after nearly 11 years may be yet another herald of the American sitcom's end — but the series can go out counting itself among the icons of the genre. Wednesday's two-hour finale on US network ABC began with a documentary and concluded with a two-part episode. The half-hour "mockumentary" followed multiple branches of the goofy but loving Pritchett clan for 248 episodes over 11 seasons. This season's nearly four million viewers per episode are still a far cry from the show's peak popularity in 2013 and 2014, when it would garner at least 14 million watches a week — and when video streaming had not yet reached its prime.

"Modern Family"'s debut made a big splash among audiences and critics alike, winning a Golden Globe for best comedy series in 2012.

It combined fake on-set interviews — like "The Office" — with an upbeat tone. The episodes' signature structure often saw detached plot lines pay off with a central joke in the final act. "We debuted in 2009, when comedy was tilting heavily toward the cynical," the show's co-creator Christopher Lloyd wrote on The Hollywood Reporter site. "And much of it

was terribly funny. But there did seem to be an opening for comedy that had heart." The formula worked, proving there was still demand for a straightforward style that many had already said was on its way out. But the recipe was anything but stale. The series was credited for helping to normalize gay characters by including two men who adopted a baby girl — a much more unexpected sight on TV a decade ago than in 2020.

And Sofia Vergara's quasi-matriarch Gloria was one of the only major Hispanic characters on television at the time, though some accused the portrayal of playing into negative stereotypes of a Colombian woman. While some film and TV projects have been delayed due to the spread of the coronavirus, the production for "Modern Family" was finished before lockdowns began. And now Luke Dunphy actor Nolan Gould hopes the ending can be a bright spot. "I'm glad that in the midst of all that's going on in the world, there's going to be a finale for Modern Family," he told the site Hollywood Life. "We can bring in a little bit of positivity and a little bit of joy into people's lives and give people a sense of closure." —AFP

## Top French fashion brands start making free masks

Louis Vuitton is converting five of its French workshops to make masks for frontline health workers, the luxury brand said Wednesday. Its chairman Michael Burke praised employees who had volunteered to make the non-surgical masks with France hit — like several other countries — by shortages of protective facing coverings. He said hundreds of thousands of masks would be produced in the workshops which usually turn out designer clothes and luxury

leather goods. Dior, which is also owned by LVMH, the world's biggest luxury goods group, has been making masks since the end of last month for hospital staff.

It said that seamstresses who usually work on couture creations had volunteered to go back to its ateliers in Redon in Brittany in western France, which has been closed since France went into lockdown on March 17. "In an exceptional show of solidarity, our wonderful petites mains (or "little hands", as those who make luxury clothes are called) are working tirelessly" to protect health workers, the label said. A number of fashion labels have also been making masks for free, with designers also sharing their DIY patterns online. LVMH boss Bernard Arnault, the world's second richest man after Amazon's Jeff Bezos, last month ordered his perfumeries that usually make fragrances for Dior, Guerlain and Givenchy to switch production to hydroalcoholic gel hand sanitizer. The gel was then distributed free to French hospitals. LVMH said they would make as much of the gels "as was needed... and honor the commitment as long as necessary." —AFP



Louis Vuitton chairman Michael Burke says hundreds of thousands of masks will be produced in the company's workshops which usually turn out designer clothes and luxury leather goods. — Denisfilm/ IStock.com pic via AFP



The cast of ABC's "Modern Family" is seen at the Screen Actors Guild Awards in 2014. —AFP

## Disney+ streaming service hits 50 million users

The Walt Disney Company on Wednesday said its television streaming service has already won 50 million paid subscribers just five months after its launch in the US. Disney+ rolled out in India and eight Western European countries in recent weeks. About eight million of its paid subscriptions are in India, where Disney+ is offered in conjunction with existing Hotstar service. "We're truly humbled that Disney+ is resonating with millions around the globe, and believe this bodes well for our continued expansion throughout Western Europe and into Japan and all of Latin America later this year," direct-to-consumer and international chairman Kevin Mayer said in a release.

The Walt Disney Company last month rolled out Disney+ streaming service in seven European countries, but had reduced bandwidth — and hence reduced output quality — because of the heavy demand on network infrastructure during the coro-

navirus crisis. Strict confinement rules are keeping millions of people at home in a bid to curtail the outbreak, effectively providing an enormous captive audience for the US entertainment giant's contender in the streaming market. After its US launch last November, Disney+ is now streaming in Austria, Britain, France, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Spain and Switzerland.

Disney is hoping its subscription rate of 6.99 euros a month (£5.99 in Britain and \$6.99 in the US) will be a small price to pay for in-home access to its blockbuster films and franchises. It aims to compete with Netflix, Apple and Amazon by leveraging its huge catalogue of Disney animated classics along with its Pixar, Marvel and National Geographic movies — not to mention its wildly successful "Star Wars" franchise. Leading television streaming service Netflix reported having 167 million subscribers in a quarterly earnings report early this year. —AFP



Members of a flat-sharing community watch the 'Bambi' film of Disney at their living room, in Dortmund, western Germany, on March 27, 2020, amidst the pandemic of the new coronavirus COVID-19. —AFP

# RAP, 'FROZEN 2' HELP REVIVE LAPLAND'S ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

Supporting a grey hoodie, goatee beard and oversized headphones, rapper Amoc spits a stream of aggressive, staccato rhymes into the microphone of his home studio as he works on new material. The punchy rhythm of the 35-year-old's vocals would sound familiar to rap lovers all over the world. But Amoc's lyrics are only understandable to the 300 speakers of the seriously endangered language of Inari Sami, from Finland's far north. Until the middle of the last century, the 10 languages of the indigenous Sami people — who are spread across the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia — were decimated by brutal assimilation policies by their governments.



Rapper Amoc, whose real name is Mikkal Morottaja, is pictured as he raps in the seriously endangered language of Inari Sami in Inari, Finland.

Now, a new generation of young speakers has spawned music, TV programs and even a Disney blockbuster, in a "golden age" for Sami languages. But re-learning the almost-forgotten tongues has stirred up painful memories of past injustices against the Sami. "The more you learn," says Sami parliament president Tiina Sanila-Aikio, "the more you realize this might be something that you cannot ever take back as a mother tongue."

## Not flowers but violence

When Amoc — real name Mikkal Morottaja — started rapping two decades ago, only "10 or fewer" young people could speak his language. His preferred themes of "occultist horror and violence" did not always go down well with the other Inari Sami speakers, who thought his lyrics would be more traditional. "The older people didn't realize that it's not about flowers and nature," he tells AFP. "I don't think they liked my music so much." Morottaja often has to innovate to express modern concepts in a language more tailored to describing indigenous traditions such as reindeer herding. Inari Sami used to have no word for outer space, for instance.

But his father, Matti, an activist and president of the language council, has been able to advise and even help

create new constructions. In the case of "space", Inari Sami has now adopted "komovuota", which literally means "openness". Morottaja's latest project is a collaboration with fellow Sami rapper Ailu Valle. Valle speaks a different language, Northern Sami, with 25,000 speakers and classed as "endangered" by UNESCO. The pair have played gigs far beyond Sami-speaking areas: in the United States, Canada and around Europe. Initially inspired by Eminem and the Wu-Tang Clan, Valle first rapped in English and Finnish, avoiding Northern Sami. "I thought I'd need urban vocabulary," he tells AFP in his remote wooden home on the shore of the frozen Ivalo river.

But learning at university about his culture and its history of oppression sparked a determination to sing in Sami. "I thought it's the same as in America," Valle says. "A minority expressing themselves in their own community and within the bigger society." His early songs drew on Sami literature, including the internationally acclaimed poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapaa, whose 1988 epic "Beaivi ahcazan" ("The Sun, My Father") is an intimate and melodic voyage through thousands of years of Sami history.

## Immersive 'language nests'

Until at least the 1960s, Sami children were routinely forbidden to use their mother tongue at school, under an education system that saw Sami people as second-class citizens to be assimilated into mainstream society. But a gradual shift in attitudes across the Nordic countries resulted in a milestone in 1992, when Finland passed a Sami language law giving speakers the right to use their mother tongue with authorities. Since then, the number of younger speakers has grown thanks to immersive "language nest" schools and nurseries, a policy copied from New Zealand's Maori language revival.

Yet still only a quarter of the country's 10,000 Sami speak a Sami language, Finland's Sami parliament says. "One major concern is that rights to education and services in Sami only apply in Lapland's designated Sami region," parliament's language protection secretary Anne Kirste Aikio tells AFP. "Even though over half of Sami live in cities and elsewhere." Finland's centre-left government has promised to address the issue, such as by expanding distance and online teaching in Sami. For now, the children's programme "Unna Junna" is a vital resource.

Produced since 2007 by Finnish broadcaster YLE, each episode covers aspects of Sami life, in all three of Finland's Sami languages. Producer Heli Huovinen and her small team sometimes ask viewers and their parents



Rapper Ailu Valle, who raps in the endangered Northern Sami language and also translated into it the lyrics for the dubbed version of the Disney movie "Frozen 2", poses for a picture in Inari, Finland.

—AFP photos

what they would like to see. "They want more films about nature, about animals, about traditional Sami things and ways of life," she tells AFP. "We were expecting modern things like robots and computer games." Huovinen, in her early 30s, grew up with a strong Inari Sami identity but had no opportunities to learn the language until high school aged 16. "It would have been so cool to have Sami children's TV, I could have learnt from that," she says. "So I'm very happy that we have children's TV now." But Sami's growing popularity has also highlighted a shortage of resources and teachers. "We need more schoolbooks, we need more media, we need more arts and all kinds of support," Huovinen says.

## Elsa and Anna in Sami

In a sign that mainstream culture is becoming more widely available in the Sami languages, in December the blockbuster hit "Frozen 2" became the first ever Disney film to be dubbed into Northern Sami. Continuing the adventures of Queen Elsa and Princess Anna, "Jiknon 2" — as it is called in Northern Sami — draws heavily on Sami folklore and ways of life. The sisters embark on a trek through an enchanted forest to meet the tent-dwelling Northuldra tribe, whose clothes and reindeer-herding way of life are distinctly Sami.

The soundtrack, meanwhile, features traditional Sami "yoik" singing. Ailu Valle, tasked with translating the film's song lyrics, describes the release as an "exceptional" moment for Northern Sami children. Disney's producers collaborated with Sami leaders to ensure a respectful representation of their culture, and the film has been praised for rejecting the stereotypical depiction of Sami traditions as primitive. "We have had so many bad examples of our culture being misused," Sanila-Aikio, Finland's Sami parliament president, tells AFP. "It's a win-win for all of us and we're very happy with this collaboration," she says.—AFP

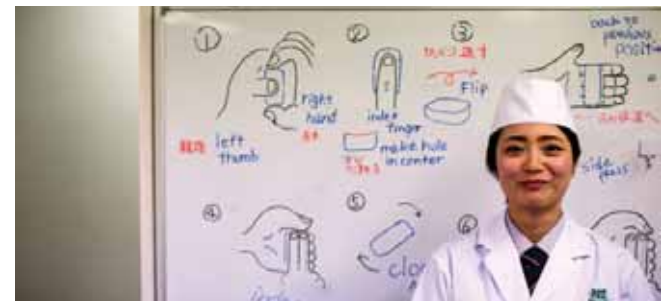
Rapper Amoc who raps in the seriously endangered language of Inari Sami, poses for a picture in his home studio in Inari, Finland.



Mizuho Iwai, an apprentice at Sushi Ginza Onodera restaurant, grinds wasabi at the restaurant in Tokyo.



A sushi set at the Sushi Ginza Onodera restaurant in Tokyo.



In this picture Yuki Noguchi, a student at Tokyo Sushi Academy, poses in front of a white board bearing technics of making sushi in Tokyo.—AFP photos

## WOMEN FIGHT FOR A PLACE AT THE TABLE AS SUSHI CHEFS IN JAPAN

Women have warm hands, their periods alter their sense of taste and they can't work long hours — just some of the claims from those in Japan who believe women can't be sushi chefs. But a growing number of women in the country determined to shatter those myths are training and working as sushi chefs in some of Japan's most revered restaurants and institutions. Mizuho Iwai is a trainee at the upscale Onodera restaurant in Tokyo's Ginza, a ritzy neighborhood home to some of the world's top-ranked sushi restaurants. In an industry where women are still rarely seen, she knew she would be an anomaly. "I think there are a few (female) chefs but it's rare. But I wanted to challenge things because of that," the 33-year-old apprentice told AFP. "I thought: this is my mission."

And at Onodera, she's not totally alone, there was one other woman among the 10 apprentices training at the restaurant before it closed temporarily in April over the coronavirus outbreak. All 10 of the restaurant's chefs are men. The work can be gruelling and requires years to master. Apprentices must learn everything from the names of different types of fish to removing scales and slicing properly. They are even instructed on how to correctly enter through the traditional drapes inside Onodera, by lifting and parting them with an elbow. "My colleagues have accepted me," said Iwai, who decided to become a sushi chef after cooking in small Japanese restaurants. "They don't treat me specially just because I'm a woman," she added, after learning how to slice Japanese horse mackerel. "They teach me as a person."

### 'Strong resistance' to women

The world of washoku, or Japanese cuisine, has long been dominated by men, more so than Italian or French cuisine, according to Fumimasa Murakami, a 54-year-old teacher at Tokyo Sushi Academy, which was still running a scaled back schedule of classes in early April. There is no official data on the gender breakdown of

sushi chefs in Japan, but Murakami estimates women make up "less than 10 percent." "(Resistance) against female chefs remains strong in Japanese cuisine, including sushi," he said. "Customers who don't want a female chef at the counter do exist," he added. "Older customers in particular have difficulty accepting it."

But even sushi chefs have been known to repeat claims that women's hands are too warm to keep raw fish fresh, or that their periods alter their sense of taste. Others say the job is unsuitable for women because of the long and late hours. "In Japan, it is still strongly believed that it is women who take care of family. But sushi chefs work in the evening so it's difficult for women," said Yuki Noguchi, a 32-year-old former primary school teacher who finished her eight-month sushi chef training at the academy in December. "That's why I think the number of women who want to become a sushi chef is small in the first place," she said.

### 'Physically tough'

Onodera's head chef Akifumi Sakagami said the sushi world's reputation for punishing training drove away women but also young



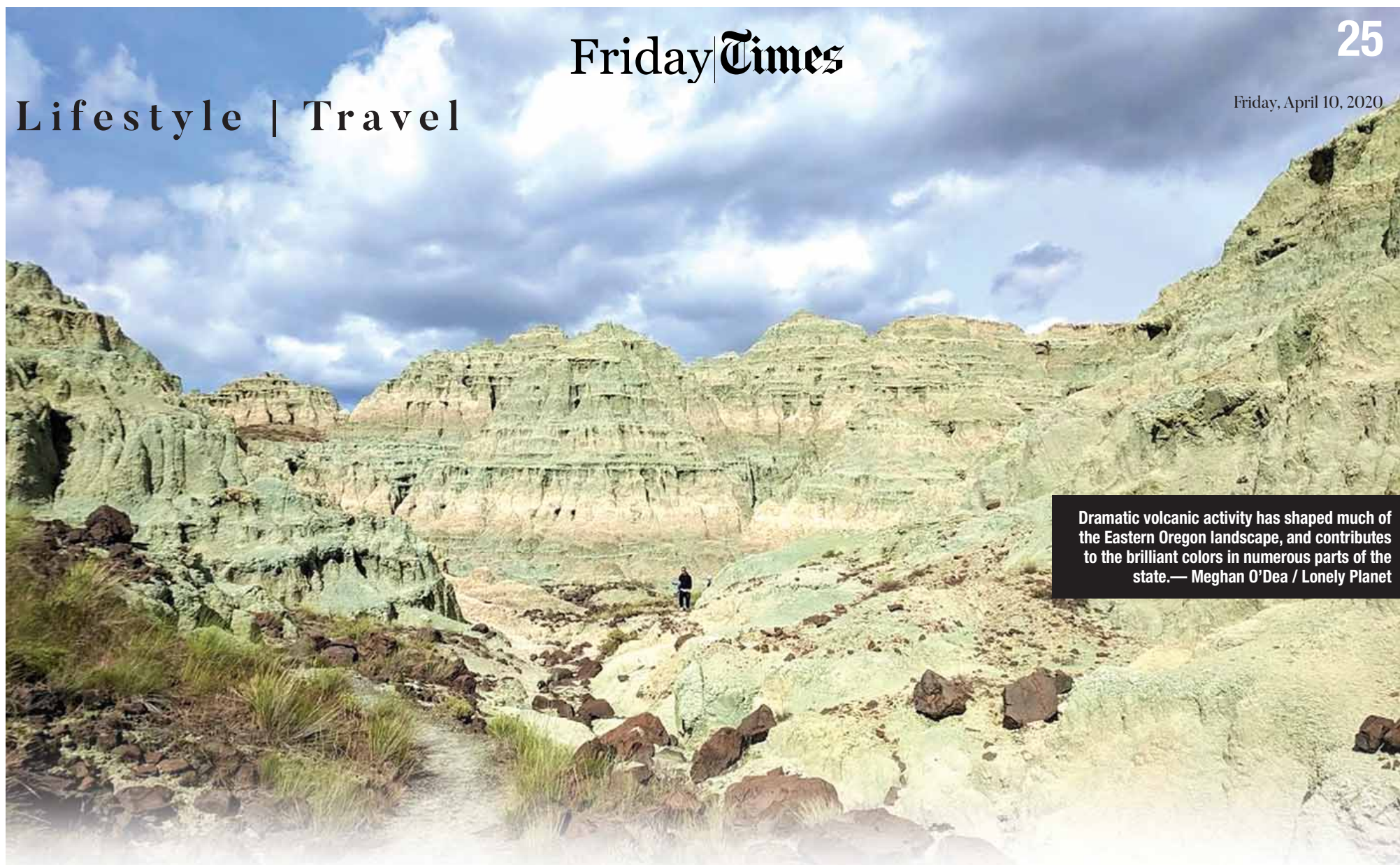
people of both genders. "I think women need a lot of courage to jump in," the 46-year-old said. Sakagami started as an apprentice more than 30 years ago in the northern city of Sapporo, when female chefs and trainees were essentially nonexistent. "When I joined the industry, the working conditions in the washoku world were tough," he said, as he showed Iwai how to thinly slice tuna and taught her how to properly peel freshly steamed shrimp. "It was long working hours with low pay. It was physically tough." "But the work environment is changing along with other changes in society. I think it's getting better for both men and women," he said.

He welcomes those changes and says being a chef depends not on gender but "competence, talent and how much effort people put in." Fuka Sano, the other female apprentice at Onodera, said she didn't think too much about the lack of women in the field when she decided to become a sushi chef. "I guess women think a sushi chef is a man's job because there are so few women," the 18-year-old said. But she was determined to enter the profession, after a formative trip to London. "I'm sorry to say this but sushi at chain restaurants in Britain didn't seem appealing!" she laughed. She hopes to improve the standards of Japanese food overseas.

And Sano wants her food to be judged on its own merits, without regard for her gender. "I want them to come (to the restaurant) for food," she said, not "because I'm a woman." Her fellow apprentice Iwai hopes women like her are helping change the industry. "It doesn't matter whether the chef is a man or woman," she said. "I hope the fixed image will disappear and there will be more options for women." "It's really a fun job."—AFP

**Fuka Sano, an apprentice at Sushi Ginza Onodera restaurant, removes the fish bones while learning how to make sushi at the restaurant in Tokyo.**





Dramatic volcanic activity has shaped much of the Eastern Oregon landscape, and contributes to the brilliant colors in numerous parts of the state.— Meghan O'Dea / Lonely Planet

# 10 natural wonders so pretty you won't believe they're real

**D**ramatic sandstone arches, alabaster-white ancient springs, all-encompassing fields of periwinkle – all the stuff of travel daydreams, right? Natural features around the world are often a sight for sore eyes when you've been focused on the day-to-day, especially natural wonders that seem to test the imagination and seem more suited to storybooks than scientific journals and geographic atlases. Some are popular destinations for travelers (when we're not social distancing, that is), others are far-flung, remote, and overlooked. But all of them are stunners.

If you're longing for a taste of earth's most artistic, stunning natural offerings, that showcase the world at its most tantalizing and stupefying, these 10 natural wonders are total eye candy:



La Salinas de Torreveja are a unique salt lagoon in Spain.  
— Nikolay Tsuguliev

Phong Nha-Ke Bang national park is home to two of the largest caves in the world, including Hang Son Doong and Hang En, pictured here.— Getty Images



### 1. Blue Basin – Oregon, USA

The landscapes of Oregon's John Day Fossil Beds don't just reflect their prehistoric namesakes – the rocky cliffs and canyons of the Blue Basin area emanate a chalk-like blue-green that collides with the surrounding desert beige, and lends credit to the region's Painted Hills moniker. Hike a winding boardwalk for 360-degree views of seemingly paint-splattered rock formations.

### 2. Hang Son Doong – Vietnam

Only first officially surveyed in the last decade, Hang Son Doong has emerged as the world's largest cave both by volume and by cross section, making for a breathtaking view from the cavern's mouth. The cave is home to 230ft stalagmites and entire forests of trees, grown beneath massive openings in the cave's ceiling. Nearby in the same Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park is Hang En, the world's third-largest cave.

### 3. Las Salinas de Torrevieja (Pink Lake) – Spain

Take a dip in Spain's Las Salinas de Torrevieja and you'll find yourself surrounded by nature's organic blush. This regularly rose-colored lake owes its pink hue to microorganisms feeding off the abundant saltwater, and is complemented artistically by local flocks of flamingos, who gather around the shores in the thousands during breeding season.

### 4. Dockey Wood Bluebells – UK

Once a year, a verdant blue hue blankets these English woods outside London, drawing visitors by the thousands. Managed by the UK's National Trust, the Dockey Wood Nature Preserve blooms a carpet of bluebells every spring, one of the best showings in the country. Hike for miles through the bluebells and lose yourself in spring chromas.

### 5. Socotra Island – Yemen

Technically under the auspices of Yemen, geographically

part of Africa, and floating in the Arabian Sea, this archipelago is full of some of the most unique looking flora and fauna on earth. There are over 700 endemic species, including the striking dragon trees that make Socotra look a little like something from Dr. Seuss' work. Socotra is a fragment of the ancient supercontinent Gondwana – which once included Antarctica, South America and Africa.



The Ashridge Estate where these carpets of bluebells can be found was once home to the Earl of Bridgewater.—Getty Images

### 6. Horsetail Fall, Yosemite National Park – USA

Yosemite National Park's Horsetail Fall isn't just a wondrous sight by day for the millions of annual visitors to the park. On rare occasions during the park's less-crowded off seasons, the waterfall's thin stream catches a sunset's orange glow, and for a few minutes a "firefall" pierces the park's granite backdrop. While the reflection inevitably fades, this natural wonder unintentionally recreates a piece of the park's history: the man-made waterfall of smouldering coals that would regularly fall from the edge of Glacier Point in the early 20th century.



There are a lot of stunning arches and natural features in the Utah desert, but Landscape Arch is the largest, even bigger than Zion National Park's Kolob Arch.— Getty Images



The Devil's Pool is popular with visitors in the dry season. — Getty Images

#### 7. Wadi Rum – Jordan

Often a movie stand-in for Mars, the sandstone canyons and rock formations of Jordan's Wadi Rum bear little resemblance to any other geological wonders found on Earth – making this destination a must-see unlike anywhere else. Scattered with wild flora and ancient pictographs dating back two millennia, the setting's sand dunes and red rock walls seem to encompass time itself.

#### 8. Pamukkale – Turkey

The mineral-rich waters flowing around Pamukkale in southeastern Turkey once fed into the Greco-Roman settlement of Hierapolis – now a series of well-reserved ruins and a Unesco World Heritage Site. The white travertine terraces still stand, however, dreamlike in their appearance to the millions of annual visitors to the site. The name alone fits the spring's surreal attraction: Pamukkale translates literally to "Cotton Castle" in Turkish.

#### 9. Landscape Arch, Utah – USA

By name alone, Arches National Park has a reputation for

odd and natural wonders – but among the park's 2000-some sandstone arches spread across 76,679 acres of red rocks and desert sands, Landscape Arch reigns supreme.

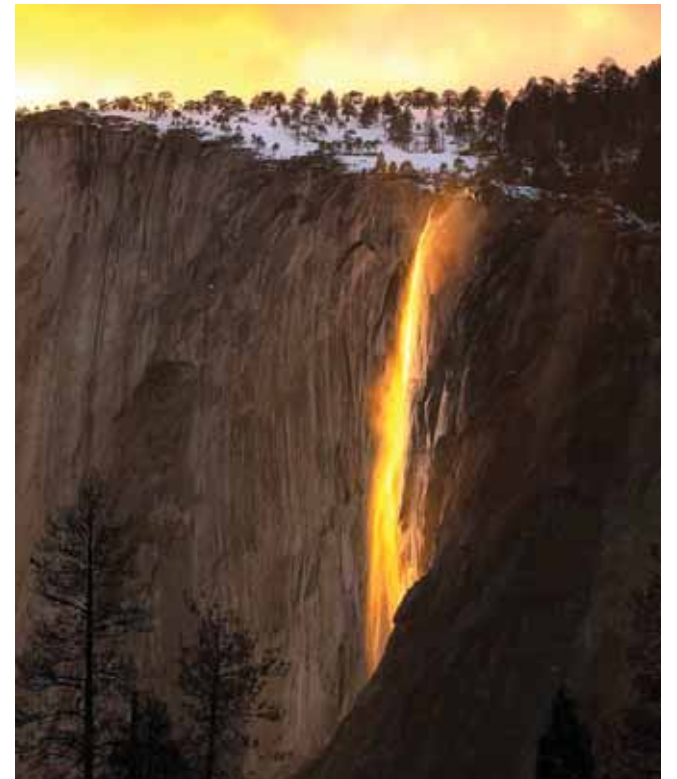
Known as the fifth largest natural arch by span in the world (and largest in the United States), the rock's sloping peak and red-orange hue forms a stunning sight against the park's near-constant blue skies.

#### 10. Devil's Pool – Zimbabwe

Victoria Falls has been an intimidating sight for thousands of years, known as "The Smoke That Thunders" for its impressive cascades stretching more than 5000ft on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe. If the views from the ground aren't thrilling enough, daredevil visitors can make their way up to a naturally formed rock pool placed in the last place anyone would think to swim: the falls' edge.

Known as the Devil's Pool, this swimming hole's incredible view of the falls' power and beauty is preceded by a precarious walk and swim through the Zambezi river. Mind the edge, as the river's 350ft drop is certainly not to be tested.

— www.lonelyplanet.com



Horsetail Falls in Yosemite National Park spills over the eastern edge of El Capitan in the valley, sometimes creating an effect known as "firefall" Image by Chase Dekker Wild-Life Images.



In addition to dragon trees, Socotra Island is home to coral reefs, rare forms of aloe and unique types of pomegranates. —Getty Images



The unique white travertine terraces created by thermal activity are found on few places on earth. — Shutterstock



Wadi Rum has been inhabited for thousands of years, but was most recently popularized by the film Lawrence of Arabia.— Getty Images

Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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Daily SuDoku: Tue 31-Mar-2020

easy

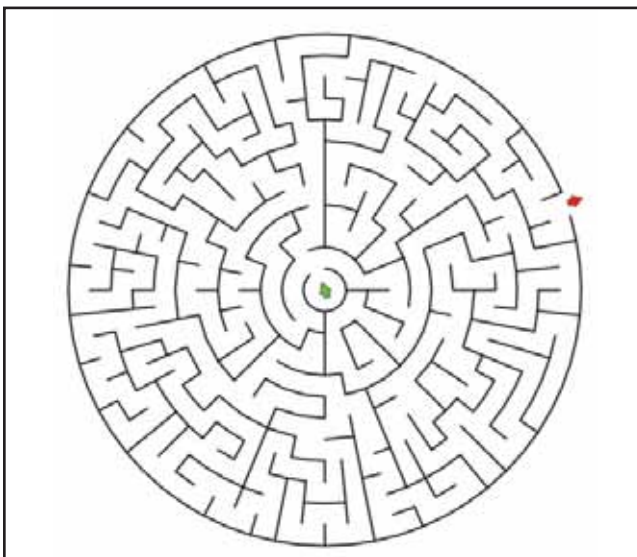
Yesterday's Solution

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Daily SuDoku: Mon 30-Mar-2020

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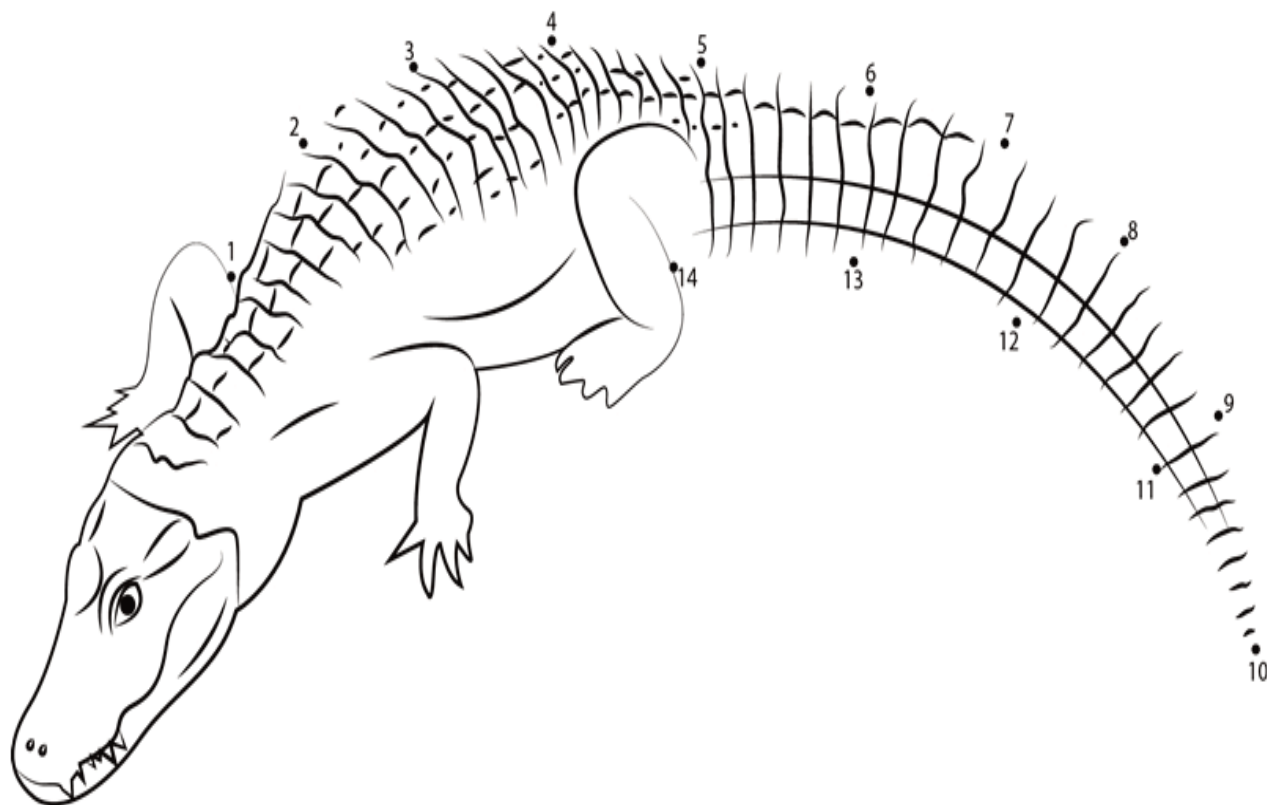
Kids Mazes



Color It



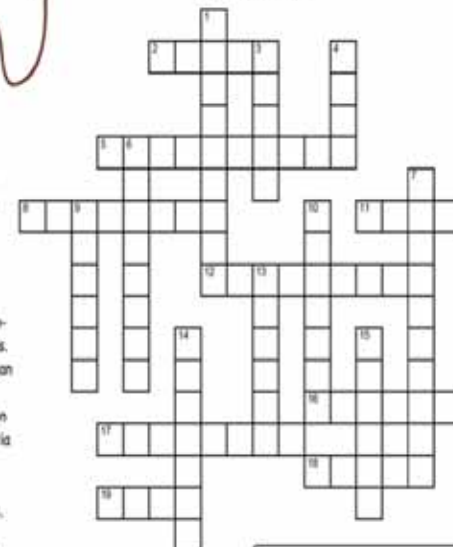
### Join the dots



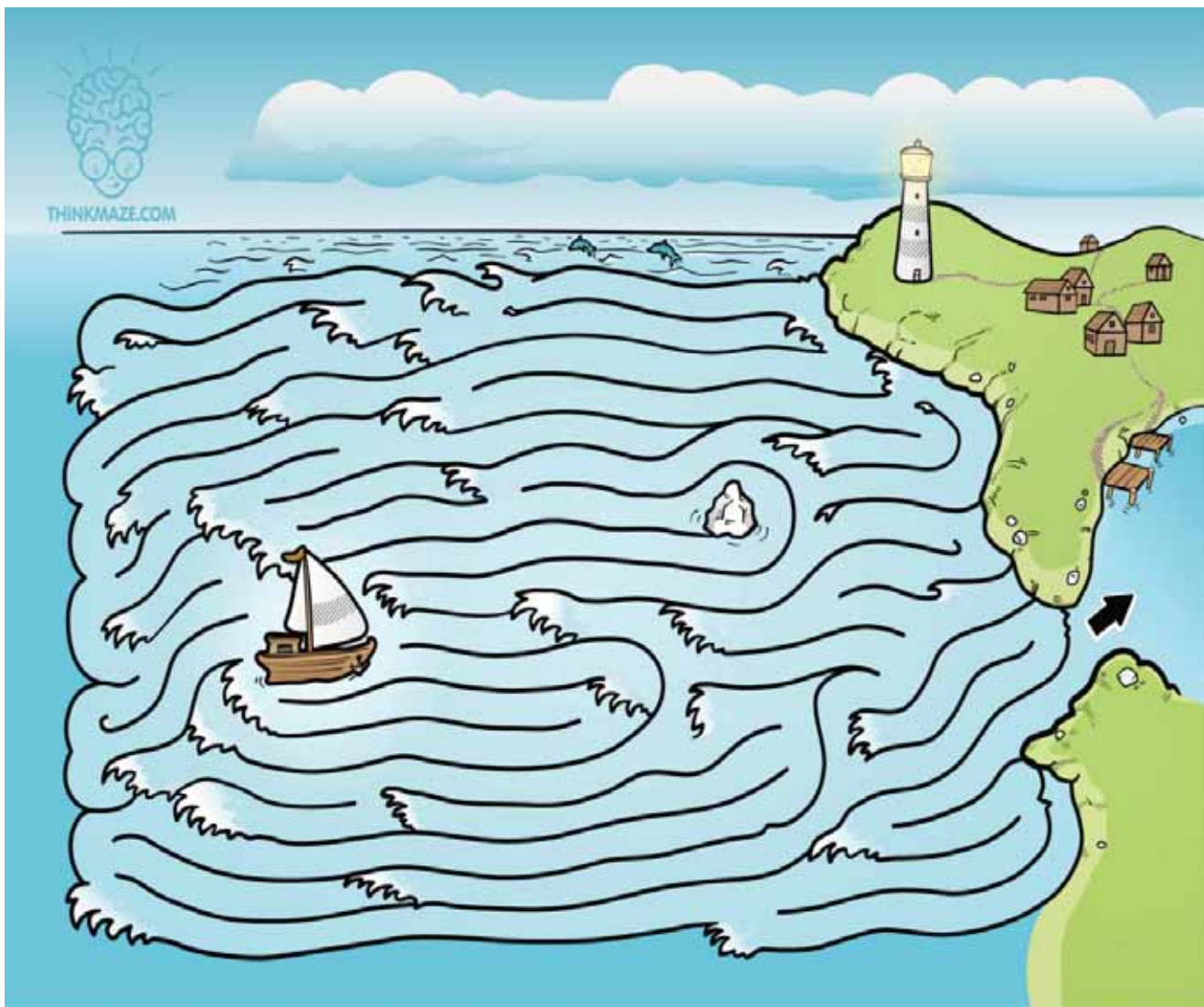
### I Love My Teeth

#### Crossword

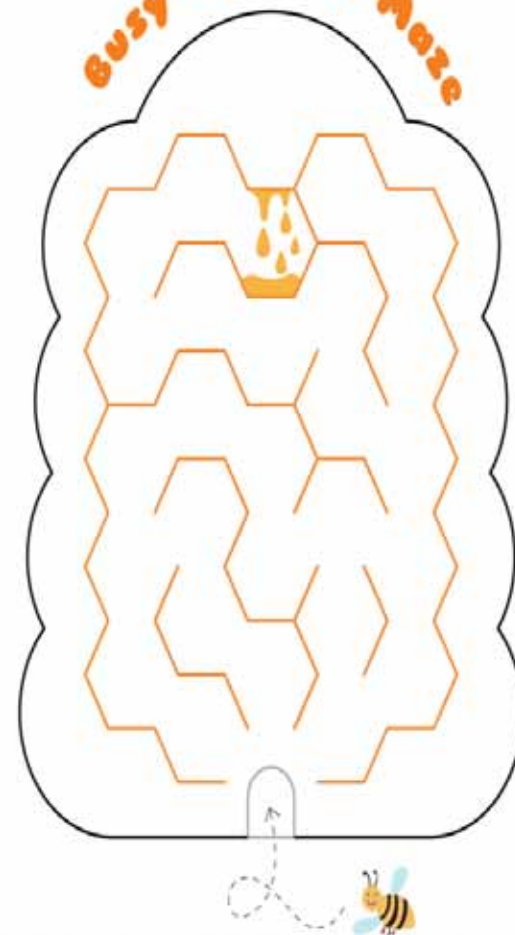
- Across
- Thread to clean teeth.
  - She might leave you money for your tooth.
  - Small organism that can rot your teeth.
  - Part of tooth embedded in your gums.
  - An expert in clean teeth.
  - Slick coating on teeth where bacteria multiply.
  - False teeth.
  - Incisors, molars, and bicuspids.
  - Tissue surrounding teeth.
- Down
- What you might gargle with.
  - Can give you cavities.
  - Picture taken during a dental exam.
  - What the dentist said.
  - Tool for cleaning your teeth.
  - Decayed part of a tooth.
  - Visit to the dentist.
  - Rinse your throat.
  - Tooth doctor.
  - Teeth straightening wires.



WORD BANK	
BACTERIA	MOUTH WASH
BRACES	OPEN WIDE
CAVITY	PLAQUE
CHECKUP	ROOT
DENTIST	SUGAR
DENTURES	TEETH
FLOSS	TOOTH FAIRY
GARGLE	TOOTHBRUSH
GUMS	X-RAY
HYGIENIST	



### Busy Bee Hive Maze



Help the bee find his store of honey

# CLINIC PAGE



Kuwait Times

248 33 199

Friday, April 10, 2020

**DR. MOHAMMAD AL HAJRY**  
 Canadian Board of Otolaryngology  
 Head & Neck Surgery and Facial Plastics.  
 Fellow of Royal College of Surgeons-Canada  
 A rare Subspecialty in Microscopic Ear Surgery, Cochlear implant & Ear diseases

- Diagnosis/Treatment of General Ears, Nose, and Throat conditions in adults & pediatric
- Minimally invasive Endoscopic sinus surgery including Balloon sinuplasty
- Minimally invasive Microscopic & Endoscopic Ear surgery
- Diagnosis & treatment of Otolgia and Audiology (Hearing loss, Tinnitus & balance disorders)
- Facial Plastic and reconstructive surgeries (Rhinoplasty, Otoplasty, Fillers & Botox injections)
- Diagnosis & treatment of snoring & obstructive sleep apnea in clinic without surgery
- Diagnosis & Treatment of voice and swallowing disorders.
- Diagnosis & Treatment of Head and Neck benign & malignant tumors.

**Salmiya, Belajat Street, Tel: 1881122**

**DR. FAHAD S BUHAIMED**  
 Consultant Cosmetic Dermatologist & Hair Transplant, NY

**ACADAMIC CERTIFICATES:**

- o Dermatology board certified.
- o Fellowship training program in cosmetic dermatology and hair transplant, New York, USA.
- o Member of American cosmetic dermatology society.
- o Referee reviewer of International journal of Dermatology.

**SPECIALIZED IN:**

- o Dermatology & Cosmetic Treatments.
- o Laser Treatments.
- o Hair Transplant & Restoration.
- o Body & Face Contouring.
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**DR KHALED ALMERRI**  
 Consultant Interventional Cardiology  
 Department: Heart & Vascular Center

**Specialized in:**

- 1-Diagnostic and therapeutic cardiac catheterization (Angiography and Angioplasty), Aortic valve implantation.
- 2- Diagnosis and treatment of coronary artery diseases
- 3- Diagnosis and treatment of heart failure, cardiomyopathies and valvular diseases.
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- ◆ Member of the American Academy of Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery.
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- ◆ Treatment of Colo-Rectal Diseases, including Colorectal Cancer
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- ◆ VATS Procedure (Treatment of Fistula through Fistuloscope)
- ◆ Treatment of Irritable Bowel Symptoms
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- ◆ Fellow of American College of Surgery
- ◆ Canadian Board of General Surgery
- ◆ Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of Canada
- ◆ American Board of Colo – Rectal Surgery
- ◆ American Board of Surgical Critical Care

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- Abdominal wall and hernia surgeries.
- G.I. surgeries.
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## Stars

## STAR TRACK

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

Ingenuity blossoms when you make the effort to do a little writing, Aries, perhaps technical manuals or other professionally oriented projects. This could represent a new stage in your professional life. You're apt to do well and attract considerable attention from higher-ups. Don't get too caught up in the need to revise, edit, then revise and edit again. It will only take up time, and it's possible to do too much rewriting.

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

Are you considering moving to a new residence, re-decorating, or making some home improvements, Taurus? If so, this is a good time to do it. These types of projects promise to go well, so don't let doubt get in your way. Explore every possibility, consider all the pros and cons, and then if it looks like it's going to work, go for it!

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

You might need to make a lot of phone calls and get through some lingering paperwork today, Gemini. A business partner or friend could be instrumental in helping clear up some loose ends that have been left hanging. Be sure you get any leftover work out of the way, because soon you'll probably be even busier. If you get bored, remember that success lies ahead. Good luck!

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

If you've been worrying about having spent too much recently, Cancer, the astral configuration indicates you should be able to put those worries behind you. There are plenty of opportunities that could bring increased income, possibly a new job, even a new career. A lot of phone calls, emails, or other communications could bring news of these possibilities your way. Be sure to record the ones that seem most promising.

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

Communication takes a prominent place in your life today, Leo. Your practical, direct, and down-to-Earth manner can be very impressive. You're known for succeeding where others have failed. This isn't lost on those above you on the hierarchical ladder. And they know that you aren't easily fooled. Expect steady personal and professional progress and a great boost to your self-confidence!

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

You could be surrounded by secrets, Virgo. A number of colleagues might be leaving to pursue new opportunities, and you could wonder if there's a reason for it that escapes you. It might even have you reevaluating whether or not you should stay put! However, don't panic because others leave. If there are things about your job that bother you, by all means consider your options.

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

A phone call or email from a friend could open up new career possibilities for you, Libra, perhaps involving the communications industry. Tales of people who have hit it big in this field could be circulating widely, but you should carefully consider all the aspects of any new option before jumping in. You don't want to have any regrets about your decision later. Think about it!

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

Communication of all sorts could be vital to you today, Scorpio. You might spend much of the day on the phone organizing an important event or perhaps clearing up a misunderstanding. This could make it a rather stressful day. It might be one of those days you just need to get through. Give yourself a bit of solitary downtime tonight to counterbalance the busy energy of the day.

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

Your outlook is apt to be optimistic, enthusiastic, and practical, Sagittarius! You have both creative and workable ideas. They're likely to lead to success, although it could take considerable time and effort to make it happen. Communication with colleagues is likely to be open, honest, and very dynamic as projects and enterprises take on a life of their own. Work hard, make it happen, and enjoy the journey!

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

Tending to paperwork could take up much of your time today, Capricorn. A lot could be riding on your careful planning and projections, so you're probably taking it very seriously. Nonetheless, don't be intimidated. Trust your instincts. You know what you're doing. Be very thorough, check everything over carefully, then put your plan into action and wait for it to bear fruit!

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

Communication between you and either a business or romantic partner should get a fresh start today, Aquarius. You've gotten to know each other better and feel more comfortable being honest and open with each other than before. All signs are that any partnerships begun, renewed, or confirmed today are likely to be successful and profitable. Bear this in mind in future months when you hit the rough spots!

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

You've been juggling career, romance, and creative interests for the past year, Pisces. This is apt to continue. However, you could find yourself building a new career involving writing or speaking, perhaps in addition to your current career. You're also apt to develop a vigorous interest in improving your health. You could make a powerful effort to change your diet and exercise habits. Good luck with it all!

## Country Codes

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



# Business

FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2020

**34** Sub-Saharan Africa to fall into recession in 2020: World Bank



**35** MSCI postpones implementation date of MSCI Kuwait indexes reclassification



**36** Commercial Bank of Kuwait holds general assembly



VIENNA: In this file photo taken on July 01, 2019 Journalists attend the 176th meeting of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) conference and the 6th meeting of the OPEC and non-OPEC countries in Vienna. OPEC and allies discussed a possible output cut, faced with an oil market collapse that was fuelled by coronavirus-ravaged demand and a vicious price war. — AFP

## Saudi, Russia to lead oil output talks

### Trump wants global cut of at least 10 million barrels a day

**DUBAI/MOSCOW/LONDON:** OPEC and other oil producers led by Russia were discussing their largest ever output cut yesterday in talks complicated by recent animosity and US resistance to mandating cuts. The spread of the coronavirus has slashed fuel demand for vehicles and planes and sent crude prices below the cost of production for many, including US shale oil producers. Benchmark Brent crude oil prices hit an 18-year low last month and are trading below \$34 a barrel, half their level at the end of 2019.

President Donald Trump on Wednesday said US oil producers were already cutting production and warned that he had many options if OPEC leader Saudi Arabia and Russia did not reach a deal yesterday. Trump said last week he had brokered a deal with Saudi Arabia and Russia that could lead to cuts of 10-15 million barrels per day

(bpd) or 10-15 percent of global supply.

The largest one-off cut which the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has ever agreed was 2.2 million bpd in 2008.

More recently, Russia and nine other producers joined OPEC in cuts which reached 1.7 million bpd, plus another 400,000 bpd which the Saudis voluntarily held back. Riyadh and Moscow, however, last month fell out over continuing those cuts, which were allowing the United States and others not participating to gain market share.

The United States has become the world's largest producer but Trump's administration has shown no appetite to mandate cuts. Saudi Arabia and Moscow have also not as yet publicly indicated any agreement on reductions or on how a cut would be distributed among participants.

Asked if a decline in US oil output due to weak

prices could count as a reduction, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday: "These are absolutely different reductions. "You are comparing overall decline in demand with cuts aimed at stabilizing global markets. These are different concepts," Peskov said.

The meeting of producers yesterday via video conference will be followed by one of Group of 20 (G20) energy ministers today.

"This meeting will be an important opportunity to assess impacts on global energy markets and reassure both markets and energy consumers," Angus Taylor, Australia's energy and emissions reduction minister, said by email regarding the G20 meeting. He declined to comment on whether Australia would help by buying oil for storage in the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve under an agreement Canberra is negotiat-

ing with the Trump administration.

#### Baseline debate

Negotiating cuts will involve setting a baseline for them, an issue muddled after Saudi Arabia and Russia both announced plans to increase output following the collapse of talks among the so-called OPEC+ group of producers in Vienna on March 6. Saudi Arabia has ramped up supply to a record 12.3 million bpd in April from less than 10 million bpd in March. Allies Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have also raised production and Moscow has said Russian companies might boost output by up to 500,000 bpd. OPEC sources said Riyadh wanted any cuts calculated from its record April levels. But Russia has said cuts should be based on first-quarter output. "The issue is still the baseline," an OPEC source said. — Reuters

## Business

# Sub-Saharan Africa to fall into recession in 2020: World Bank

## Coronavirus will cost sub-Saharan Africa \$79bn in output losses this year

**NAIROBI:** The rapidly-spreading coronavirus outbreak is expected to push sub-Saharan Africa into recession in 2020 for the first time in 25 years, the World Bank said in a new forecast yesterday.

The bank's Africa's Pulse report said the region's economy will contract 2.1 percent to 5.1 percent from growth of 2.4 percent last year, and that the coronavirus will cost sub-Saharan Africa \$37 billion to \$79 billion in output losses this year due to trade and value chain disruption, among other factors. Africa has at least 10,956 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, 562 deaths and 1,149 recoveries, according to a Reuters tally based on government statements and WHO data.



**Region's economy to contract 2.1%**

African countries and others to combat the virus and mitigate the impact of sweeping shutdowns aiming at curbing its spread. The coronavirus has led to suspension of international passenger travel in many countries on the continent, and hit sectors such as tourism.

Various African governments have announced lockdowns or curfews in response to the virus, which was slow to reach many African countries but is now growing exponentially, according to the World Health Organization. Real gross domestic product growth was projected to fall sharply particularly in the region's three largest economies - Nigeria, Angola, and South Africa, the

World Bank said.

Oil exporting-countries would also be hard-hit; while growth would likely weaken substantially in the West African Economic and Monetary Union, and the East African Community due to weak external demand, disruptions to supply chains and domestic production. The bank said the spread of the flu-like respiratory disease

likely because the model that the government uses to strip out seasonal fluctuations shows a downside bias for last week's data. States also appear to be struggling to process high volumes of claims.

Estimates in the survey were as high as 9.295 million. Going by the average forecast, last week's claims data would bring the cumulative jobless benefits claims to more than 15 million since the week ending March 21.

With more than 95 percent of Americans under "stay-at-home" or "shelter-in-place" orders, reports continue to mount of state employment offices being overwhelmed by a deluge of applications. Mike Ricci, a spokesman for Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, wrote on Twitter on Wednesday that "we have approximately 1,000 calls coming through in every two hour period of time," noting that "currently, federal employees and people who have worked in multiple states cannot file online."

As such, any moderation in claims last week would probably be temporary. The breadth of businesses shuttered because of the stringent measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, has expanded from bars, restaurants and other social gathering venues to transportation and factories. The United States has the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world. Businesses are also encouraging their lowest paid hourly workers to apply for unemployment benefits to take advantage of an extra \$600 per week for up to four months. This enhancement is part of a historic \$2.3 trillion rescue package and is on top of existing jobless benefits, which averaged \$385 per person per month in January. — Reuters



**JOHANNESBURG:** Informal vendors gather in front of a municipal office building in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, on Wednesday as they try to obtain a permit for working during the 21 days national lockdown that started on March 27, 2020, in an attempt to halt the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. —AFP

also had potential to lead to a food security crisis on the continent, with agricultural production forecast to contract 2.6 percent and up to 7 percent in the event of trade blockages. "Food imports would decline substantially (as much as 25 percent or as little as 13 percent) due to a combination of higher transaction costs and reduced

domestic demand," the bank said in a statement accompanying the report. The institutions have also called on China, the United States and other bilateral creditors to temporarily suspend debt payments by the poorest countries so they can use the money to halt the spread of the disease and mitigate its financial impact. — Reuters

## US weekly jobless claims hovering near record highs

**WASHINGTON:** The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits in the last three weeks likely totaled a staggering 15 million as tough measures to control the novel coronavirus outbreak abruptly ground the country to halt, which would cement views the economy was in deep recession.

Yesterday's weekly jobless claims report from the Labor Department, the most timely data on the economy's health, would strengthen economists' expectations of job losses of up to 20 million in April. The government reported last Friday that the economy purged 701,000 jobs in March. That was the most job losses since the Great Recession and ended the longest employment boom in US history that started in late 2010. "These dismal numbers suggest another record-breaking April jobs report," said Beth Ann Bovino, chief US economist at S&P Global Ratings in New York. "America is now in recession and as it appears to deepen, the question is how long it will take before the US recovers."

The number of initial claims for state unemployment benefits probably slipped to a seasonally adjusted 5.250 million for the week ended April 4 from 6.648 million, according to a Reuters survey of economists. The anticipated lower reading is

## Asian, European stocks up, dealers eye virus peak

**HONG KONG:** Asian and European markets rose yesterday following another strong day for Wall Street as traders buy into optimism that the coronavirus crisis could be nearing its apex, while crude extended gains on hopes top producers will agree to a massive output cut.

Despite news that thousands more people had died of COVID-19 around the world, the slowing rate of new infections is providing some much-needed buoyancy to equities as investors eye an easing of lockdown restrictions that have strangled the global economy.

Meanwhile, lawmakers in Washington are discussing further possible stimulus measures of around \$500 billion for struggling US firms, with Republicans and Democrats looking to work together in a rare sign of unity. While nearly 2,000 Americans died of the disease Wednesday, Donald Trump adviser Anthony Fauci said there could be a turnaround in the battle as soon as next week.

Citing a slowdown in hospitalizations owing to stay-at-home orders, Andrew Cuomo, governor of US hotspot New York state, told reporters: "We are flattening the curve."

That optimism was shared by Trump, who said the US was "hopefully heading towards a

final stretch, the light at the end of the tunnel". Vice President Mike Pence added: "We're beginning to see glimmers of hope."

The upbeat tone sent all three main indexes on Wall Street surging and the gains extended into Asia again. Hong Kong, Singapore and Seoul rose more than one percent apiece, Sydney and Mumbai each jumped more than three percent and Bangkok climbed more than two percent.

Shanghai added 0.4 percent but Tokyo was barely moved while there were small losses in Taipei and Wellington. London, Paris and Frankfurt all rose more than one percent in early trade.

"Signs that the number of new daily coronavirus cases is plateauing is driving expectations that social distancing measures will be lifted soon in parts of the world," said Stephen Innes of AxiCorp. "Indeed, relaxing social distancing in the new 'risk-on' barometer," he added. "Pretty much everywhere you look in financial markets there is renewed optimism."

However, while the Vix "fear index" has halved from its levels seen in mid-March there was still caution among observers, with health experts stressing that any premature loosening of restrictions could accelerate the spread of the pandemic. And the economic toll of the crisis is becoming apparent, with France now in recession after suffering its worst contraction since 1945, while European powerhouse Germany is expected to shrink by a tenth in the second quarter of the year. Despite this, EU leaders are still struggling to agree on a bailout plan to support the region, with a major sticking point being so-called "coronabonds" that would pool debt among nations. — AFP

## Business

# MSCI postpones implementation date of MSCI Kuwait indexes reclassification

## COVID-19 might impact international investors' ability to complete preparation work

**LONDON:** MSCI Inc. (NYSE: MSCI), a leading provider of research-based indexes and analytics, announced on Wednesday that it will postpone the implementation of the MSCI Kuwait Indexes to Emerging Markets until the November 2020 Semi-Annual Index Review (SAIR). While the Kuwaiti equity market remains functional the decision to postpone is related to the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the ability of international institutional investors to fully perform all the preparation work required ahead of the implementation.

MSCI would like to emphasize that the MSCI Kuwait Indexes continue to meet all the necessary criteria for a classification in Emerging Markets but temporary measures that have been introduced globally by different authorities, corporations and institutional investors which aim to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic may result in significant operational challenges around the required preparation to implement the index reclassification as part of the May 2020 SAIR.

Market participants have recently highlighted that they were experiencing difficulties

as a result of COVID-19 measures in the process of opening accounts required to trade Kuwaiti stocks. Hence, there is an increasing concern that these investors will not have their accounts open in time and will not be able to implement the reclassification during the May 2020 SAIR.

Given these challenges and the ongoing uncertainty that has been created by the COVID-19 pandemic, MSCI decided to extend the lead time ahead of the implementation of the reclassification of the MSCI Kuwait Indexes from Frontier Markets to Emerging Markets. MSCI deems this postponement necessary to ensure a smooth reclassification implementation for both international institutional investors and

local stakeholders.

As a reminder, on January 31, 2020, MSCI announced the launch of the MSCI Provisional Kuwait Indexes and the details of the Special Treatment to the MSCI Kuwait Indexes. MSCI will also extend the calculation of the MSCI Provisional Kuwait Indexes and the application of the Special Treatment until the November 2020 SAIR.



**Implementation delayed until Nov 2020**



**KUWAIT:** A trader monitors the share prices at Boursa Kuwait. MSCI has decided to postpone the implementation of the reclassification of the MSCI Kuwait Indexes to Emerging Markets until the November 2020 Semi-Annual Index Review (SAIR). —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## stc offers free delivery on online orders

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced a series of exclusive limited time offers available to stc customers in support of the State of Kuwait's decision urging people to stay at home during these current conditions. stc is now offering new and existing customers exclusive voice plans, 5G internet and Jawwy TV packages available through the Company's online store with deliveries free of charge.

In a statement released by stc, the Company emphasized the necessity for the public to abide by the instructions set by the Kuwaiti government to battle the current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and refrain from leaving the house except for emergencies. In its role, stc is offering customers exclusive packages to fulfill their in-house entertainment needs at competitive prices through the telecom company's digital channels with free delivery to all locations in Kuwait. This initiative comes in line with stc's ongoing commitment to offer the latest products and offers to its customers while supporting the country in battling this pandemic.

To enrich customers' home entertainment experience, stc is offering subscriptions to Jawwy TV, stc Kuwait's exclusive service with original and premium content, with over 120 free-to-air and paid channels. Jawwy TV provides a rich array of free and premium live channels that include MBC, Star, National Geographic, Fox Channels, Fight Channel, in addition to exclusive content from StarzPlay, Wide Khaliji, BluTV and more, all under one subscription, providing an unmatched user experience. stc has also made switching

from 4G to 5G internet packages easier by offering customers 5G service in addition to a 5G router for KD 5. Customers can stream their favorite shows, play games, surf the web and work remotely at high internet speeds, low latency and instantaneous connectivity using Kuwait's largest 5G network.

stc is also offering the latest smartphone devices with ultimate convenience through stc digital channels with the all new KD15 postpaid package available on all stc digital channels, offering unlimited local calls in addition to 500GB internet as well as selecting the preferred device from iPhone, Samsung and HUAWEI.

Commenting on the limited time offers, Chief Commercial Officer (CCO) of stc, Haneen Ibrahim Al-Fulaij, said, "Considering the current COVID-19 global pandemic, it is crucial to respect and follow the government's orders to ensure the health and safety of both citizens and residents alike". Al-Fulaij added, "These limited time offers are designed to enhance our customers' entertainment experience, while providing instantaneous communication channels for those who are working remotely from home. stc is offering all its products and services through our website (www.stc.com.kw), "mystc" mobile application, and E-Store with free delivery in Kuwait. We believe that this will allow our customers to enjoy our array of products and services without needing to leave their homes, and therefore help in the fight against COVID-19."

Al-Fulaij concluded by saying, "stc will continue to show its support to the people of Kuwait during this difficult time and maintain its collaborative efforts with the various government entities who have done an excellent job in taking action and responding to the current crisis.



Haneen Ibrahim Al-Fulaij

## Dhaman launches live broadcast program for expats

**KUWAIT:** As a part of the public service initiative during the looming COVID-19 pandemic, Dhaman Health Assurance Hospitals Company in Kuwait started a multilingual YouTube broadcast for audiences of all nationalities and linguistic needs. This live broadcast platform carries health education lessons targeting the expatriates in Kuwait on YouTube. Health lessons and programs are presented by Dhaman's Family physicians along with an opportunity for a live discussion.

This will be the best opportunity for expatriates not only in quarantine but also for the general public who need to be aware of the current situation. The live webinar in Hindi for the benefit of Indian expatriates in Kuwait was available on Wednesday at 7:00 pm Kuwait time on the link [https://youtu.be/NuXVc\\_z78hA](https://youtu.be/NuXVc_z78hA)

The topics included What do you need

to know about coronavirus?, What to do if you need to see a GP or medication?, How to look after your mental health during Coronavirus lockdown?, What is social distancing?, What is a risk group?, How to self-isolate?, How to protect yourself against coronavirus?, Are you washing your hands properly?, How to Stay Healthy while staying at home? and a wide discussion on skills to identify and connect facts about infection marks with coronavirus including the procedures to be followed.

There was a facility for expats to clarify their doubts through their language with the physicians from Dhaman Health Assurance Hospitals Company (Dhaman).

Dhaman was established by a Kuwait Ministerial Decree, as part of the development plan set forth for the State of Kuwait to provide healthcare service to a large segment of Kuwait's residents with an objective to be the first public-private partnership healthcare company in Kuwait and the GCC to adopt world-class healthcare standards. "Dhaman" is part of the Kuwait government's push to segregate healthcare, limiting access for expatriates to the public system.

## Business

# Commercial Bank holds general assembly

## Message from Chairman Sheikh Ahmad Duaij Al-Sabah

*In the name of Allah the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful*

Dear shareholders,

It is both an honor and a privilege to deliver my second statement as the Chairman of the Commercial Bank of Kuwait. We have completed another year in a challenging economic environment, focused on delivering good operating results and making the investments necessary for a strong future. We have invested in technology and digital solutions to meet our customers' needs and are constantly innovating to lead in class wherever we compete. Banking is changing, and we are committed to drive that change. We have a remarkable culture of engagement and commitment among our employees who make everything we do possible. They are driven by purpose, determined and committed to the bank. The bank continues to deliver sustainable results at operating profit level with return on equity before provision at 15.2 percent. Last year we adopted a proactive policy of early recognition of any expected problems and achieved non-performing loans level of zero. In continuation, we allocated most of the operating profit to create specific provision against some loans where management had some concerns. This specific provision was used to transfer those loans to memorandum account and resultant net profit attributable to the shareholders of the bank is zero. Thus, we maintained the non-performing loans at zero. It is a demonstration of our commitment to operate within our risk appetite but maintain strong capital and liquidity positions.

### Focusing on efficiency gains

Our purpose also requires us to be disciplined as we drive Al-Tijari forward, building competitive strength by enabling operational excellence to deliver greater value to our customers. We're making clear choices about where to focus the bank's resources in order to accelerate the execution of our strategy, deliver earnings resilience and continue growing our customer base. As we maintain steady progress

in improving the efficiency of our processes and systems, we uphold the strong risk controls that have always been foundational for Al-Tijari's growth. Our bank is in motion, adjusting proactively to changing market realities - and that means working harder than ever to realize the full benefits of our technology architecture. New initiatives were taken during 2019 to introduce new features like, but not limited to document verification by using QR technology, T-Pay for QR payments within CBK, changing password through mobile banking, KYC update, change security questions/answers through mobile banking and video tutorials about our products and services on mobile banking for customers education and easy guidance. Change transfers limit, KNET mobile (OTP) amendment, user ID retrieval via mobile and online banking and enabled T-Pay service for business accounts. Amend card limit through CBK mobile, cheque validation, allow customers to unlock their user I.D's or retrieve user I.D/ATM PIN, view standing instructions, online cheque entry enhancement with scanning ability, selection of multiple salary batches and cheques entry and transfer process with a single touch. Electronic Dividends subscription via CBK Mobile, display foreign currency transaction and its KD equivalent for accounts & prepaid cards and enhanced notifications via CBK mobile by enabling/disabling all accounts/cards alerts in a single OTP request.

### Digitizing Al-Tijari

Integral to Al-Tijari's efficiency goals and broader growth ambitions is our investment in technology. The powerful platform we've built gives us the resilience and scalability to sustain critical services and keep pace with customers' changing needs. And as new opportunities arise, we're ready to respond quickly. It's rewarding to see our digital and mobile offerings earn top marks from customers, along with recognition from peers. As customers entrust us with the data we need to make banking simpler and more personal, we're intensifying vigilance in cyber security and fraud protection. In 2019, we integrated the bank's defensive ca-



KUWAIT: Commercial Bank of Kuwait holds general assembly

pabilities into a central function, with a mandate to protect against threats and strengthen the trust that customers place in us.

### Synopsis of 2019 Financials

We generated an operating profit, before provisions, of KD 108.5 million for the year 2019 (2018: KD 106.0 million). In line with Bank's prudent policy of proactive recognition of problems, the operating profit was mainly allocated to specific provisions against certain loans where the management has some concerns. The specific provision was used to transfer those loans to the memorandum account. The resultant net profit attributable to the shareholders of the bank is zero for the year 2019 (2018: KD 63.8 million). As at the end of the year, total provisions held with the bank amounted to KD 127.3 million. The Bank will continue to pursue its right to recover loans transferred to the memorandum account by taking appropriate measures required in this regard. The operating profit before provision was higher by KD 2.4 million (2.3 percent) compared to last year. The Bank witnessed a healthy growth in the key areas of business and revenue. Total assets increased by 9.0 percent

### Looking at the future

We hold ourselves to high standard, because doing what's right - always, even when it's not the easy choice - creates loyal customers. We've set priorities, our customers and all of our stakeholders count on us to act decisively in the face of change. We will continue doing our part to move things forward and provide tailored banking services with value addition to our customers, thus becoming "Bank of Choice". Bank is also committed to make positive impact on the society as a whole.

I am incredibly proud of all the work our team is doing together to focus on our customers, delivering value to our shareholders, and strengthening our economic environment. We are committed to continue to provide effective and efficient services every single day to our valued customers, and we appreciate the trust they place in us. Last but not the least, thanks to all the regulatory authorities, especially the Central Bank of Kuwait for their constant support.

## India's govt warms to e-commerce

**NEW DELHI:** Three days after India imposed a nationwide lockdown, Devender Singh revved up his motorcycle to deliver meat and eggs to customers - but his heart was in his mouth as he closed in on a police barricade on a deserted New Delhi road.

Beatings of delivery workers by overzealous police after Prime Minister Narendra Modi late last month suddenly imposed the world's biggest lockdown to contain the coronavirus had unnerved him. "That day, it felt like my time to get thrashed had come," Singh, 30, told Reuters on a quiet summer afternoon as he was out making deliveries.

"But what I was expecting didn't happen. The police were very friendly - they just asked me where I was going and why," Singh said he was allowed to proceed after he flashed a so-called movement pass authorised by the police and given to him by his employer Licious, an online

meat store backed by Bertelsmann's venture capital arm and Silicon Valley's Mayfield Fund.

E-commerce is now limping back to life in India as the border closures, warehouse shutdowns and general confusion that initially accompanied the three-week shutdown order have eased. While still clearing a backlog of previously placed orders, most online retailers are accepting new orders, albeit with delayed deliveries and a limited product catalogue.

Moreover, political coldness towards e-commerce, which many in India see as a threat to millions of brick-and-mortar retailers, has faded. While grocery stores and pharmacies are still open, it has become evident that Singh and the thousands of delivery workers like him have become crucial frontline soldiers in the country's battle against the pandemic. Highlighting that shift, two days into the lockdown, Trade Minister Piyush Goyal held a video conference with nearly two dozen e-commerce executives in a bid to understand hurdles faced by the sector. That contrasts with Goyal's public snub of Amazon boss Jeff Bezos during his India visit in January, when he said the company wasn't doing a "great favour to India" by investing a billion dollars.

Amazon and its Walmart-controlled rival Flipkart have until now not had a warm welcome in India: New Delhi tweaked foreign investment rules, forcing the two companies to alter their structures, and anti-trust probes have been launched against them over allegations of deep discounts that hurt small businesses. "While e-commerce companies are still somewhat struggling to fulfil deliveries, everyone - the government, customer, and Indian businesses - is fast realizing that online retail cannot be ignored anymore," said Satish Meena, a senior analyst at Forrester Research. "I believe the government will now urgently streamline e-commerce regulations which will help ease processes and remove bottlenecks in the sector."

Singh said his wife had been reluctant to let him go to work, fearing he might contract the virus, be assaulted by police or even have his new motorcycle confiscated. But as the sole bread winner for his family of three, Singh had little choice. He delivers eight to 10 orders each day, down from about 20 when supplies and orders volumes were normal. Though, unlike in some countries where workers are paid per delivery, that doesn't mean a hit to his monthly wage of about 18,000 rupees (\$235). —Reuters

## Sports

# James hopes Lakers can eventually rekindle their revival season

## NBA legend Michael Jordan wins long-running China trademark dispute

**LOS ANGELES:** LeBron James says the abrupt shutdown of the NBA season due to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic has left the Los Angeles Lakers feeling like they still have something to prove. The Lakers were in the midst of a revival season, having made the playoffs for the first time in seven years, when the league suspended the 2019-20 season on March 11 after Rudy Gobert tested positive for COVID-19.

At the time of the postponement, the Lakers were in first place in the Western Conference and had the second-best record in the league behind Milwaukee. If the season doesn't resume, James says there will be a void.

"Closure? No. But to be proud of what we were able to accomplish to this point, I'll be able to look back and say we did something special in that small period of time," James said during a conference call with reporters on Wednesday.

"Just the ups and downs not only on the floor but off the floor everything that we've had to endure as Laker faithful," James said he's having trouble coming to grips with the scale of the pandemic, which has so far killed more than 14,700 people in the US, including almost 200 in his home state of Ohio.

"How do you assess what's going on over the last three weeks or however long this pandemic has been going on? It's unnatural," James said. "It's something that's never happened before. Some of you guys are older than me, probably never seen this happen before. You just kind of take all the information you have on a day-to-day basis."

He has been spending his self-isolating time practicing basketball with his son Bronny and talk-

ing on the phone with teammates and Lakers coach Frank Vogel. "I got a couple friends that have their own indoor facilities," James said of his training sessions with his son. "They strip it down, wipe it down. It's pretty much me in there along with my son. It's just us." He wants to return to basketball but says it will be up to the experts to decide when. NBA commissioner Adam Silver said this week he doesn't expect a decision on whether they can salvage the season until at least May.

"Once they allow us to resume some type of activity, I would love to get things back going," James said. "If it's Las Vegas or somewhere else that can hold us and keep us in the best possible chance to

be safe, not only on the floor but off the floor as well. Those conversations will be had." Meanwhile, China's Supreme Court has ruled in favour of basketball legend Michael Jordan in a long-running trademark dispute, ending an eight-year legal battle with a Chinese sportswear firm that illegally used

### Verdict — a rare victory



his name.

Upholding intellectual property rights is one of the core disputes of the US-China trade war, and a phase one deal signed in January saw Beijing pledge to improve protections of intellectual property. The landmark ruling, made late last month, prohibits the Fujian-based Qiaodan Sports from using the Chinese translation of Jordan's name, Qiao Dan. The retired Chicago Bulls player and six-time NBA championship winner has a huge following in China, a country that has legions of avid basketball fans. The Supreme Court decision overturns two previous verdicts in favour of the Chinese firm. However, it still allows the firm to

cided to stay on until at least July, hoping to beef up their skills.

"The Tokyo Olympics (have been) postponed. It's not a problem," team coach Joseph Rensio Tobia Omirok, 59, told AFP.

"I'm happy because I'm still training, and in other countries they have no training. They're sitting in their house but here we are OK... Training now is going OK."

The decision to postpone the Games for a year until July 2021 came after athletes and sports associations heaped pressure on organisers and Olympic officials, pointing to scrapped qualifying events and restrictions on training.

Japan has so far avoided the sort of major outbreak seen in Europe and the United States and even a state of emergency declared on Tuesday only applies to some parts of the country, not including Gunma prefecture, where Maebashi is located.

The city of 340,000 has pledged to continue



LeBron James

continue using its logo of a silhouetted basketball player — which has similarities with the "Jumpman" logo used by Nike to promote its "Air Jordan" line of sports shoes. However the Supreme Court referred the case over the use of the logo for retrial by the State Intellectual Property Office. In 2016, Jordan won the right to his name in Chinese characters, but the Supreme Court upheld the firm's right to use its trademark "Qiaodan" in Romanised English.

Qiaodan Sports said in a Weibo statement Tuesday that the ruling "would not impact the normal use of [its] existing trademarks, nor would it affect normal business operations." Founded in 2000, the sportswear franchise operates more than 5,700 stores nationwide. It has also applied for

nearly 200 similarly named trademarks including different Chinese spellings of "Qiaodan", "Flying Power" and "Qiaodan King", according to the verdict. In 2017, the sportswear brand New Balance was awarded \$1.5 million in copyright damages by a Chinese court over its famous "N" logo, which was illegally copied by a local sports shoe firm. The verdict — a rare victory for a Western brand in a Chinese intellectual property infringement case — was announced shortly after US President Donald Trump launched a sweeping investigation into China's record on intellectual property. The UN said this week that China became the world leader in international patent filings last year, unseating the United States which had held the top spot for more than four decades.—AFP

## S Sudan athletes keep Olympic dreams alive

**MAEBASHI:** The postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was a heavy blow for many athletes, but a team of South Sudanese sprinters training in a Japanese town are hoping to turn the delay to their advantage.

The four athletes and a coach have been in the city of Maebashi, north of Tokyo, since November, taking advantage of training facilities that aren't available in their young but poor home country.

And with news of the historic postponement of the Games over the coronavirus, they've de-

helping the young athletes by providing them with accommodation, meals and the use of a local public track, along with an army of volunteer coaches and translators.

Maebashi decided to host the team — the coach, one female and two male Olympic sprinters and one male Paralympic sprinter — as part of its efforts to promote peace through sports.

The athletes have visited local schools and community events to talk about their homeland, which won independence in 2011 and has been battling to recover from a civil war. They regularly practise with local children and have learned to speak simple Japanese.

The athletes say they have come to enjoy life in the city, abloom with cherry blossoms after a bitter winter, despite being more than 10,000 kilometres from home, where they had to practise on simple empty fields, not a track.

"Before I reached Japan, I didn't know what kind of people the Japanese are," said Abraham

Majok Matet Guem, 20, who runs the 1,500 metres. "The love I got here... is more than even what I expected. So I have not missed home so much because I am staying in a very peaceful environment with very loving people. So I was very surprised at that."

The city has raised more than 14 million yen (\$128,000) from across Japan through a special taxation scheme and is continuing to raise funds to secure the total 20 million yen needed to keep the team on through July.

Officials were quick to reassure the team they would be welcome to stay until at least July, after the Olympic delay was announced.

"We are eager to give them our continued support," said Shinichi Hagiwara, a sports official at the Maebashi city government.

The athletes' fate after that will be decided after the city consults with South Sudan's Olympic authority, the Japanese government, the track team and others, Hagiwara said.—AFP

## Sports

# Premier League stars launch fund to 'help' health service virus fight

## Players 'agreed to play their part' as pressure mounts

**LONDON:** Premier League players announced on Wednesday they had launched an initiative to generate funds for Britain's National Health Service (NHS) to help against the coronavirus pandemic. The idea — named #PlayersTogether — has been set up to "help those fighting for us on the NHS frontline" during the COVID-19 outbreak. "It is about we, as players, collaborating together to create a voluntary initiative, separate to any other league and club conversation," a statement from the group said.

"To try and help, along with so many others in the country, to make a real difference," it added. Individuals such as league leaders Liverpool's captain Jordan Henderson, Tottenham's Harry Kane and Arsenal's Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang were among those to post on social media about the move.

Earlier this week, the Premier League proposed wage cuts of 30 percent but talks have hit a stumbling block, with the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) warning the NHS could suffer from the loss of tax receipts.

The league's chief executive Richard Masters admitted the virus fall-out could cost the top-flight "at least £1 billion" (\$1.23 billion, 1.13 billion euros). PFA chief executive Gordon Taylor said

the players had "agreed to play their part" as pressure mounts to find a collective pay deal.

England's top-flight stars had come under heavy fire over their lack of action, which contrasts sharply with significant pay cuts taken by players at other leading European clubs such as Barcelona and Bayern Munich.

Manchester United attacker Marcus Rashford defended his fellow players.

"I think there has been plenty of occasions, for me personally, where we've tried to help but we've not helped in the best way possible," Rashford told BT Sport. "You can get some backlash from that. We wanted to take our time with the decision," he added.

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock was originally among senior politicians calling for players to take a cut and "play their part".

"Warmly welcome this big-hearted decision from so many Premier League footballers to create #PlayersTogether to support NHS Charities. You are playing your part," he tweeted after the Wednesday's announcement.

On Tuesday, English Football Association chief Greg Clarke called on players and fans to "share the pain to keep the game alive".

Appearing at an FA Council meeting, Clarke

navirus have forced many athletes into self-isolation, while most major meets and marathons in the first half of the year have been postponed.

Athletes need to reach certain qualifying marks to be available for selection for the Olympics by their national federations. The qualifying period started in 2019 and, after the suspension, will continue until the end of May for the marathon and 50 kilometre race walk, and June next year for all other events.

Jamaican middle-distance runner Aisha Praught-Leer thought the decision was premature and would affect the ability of athletes to earn sponsorship by achieving Olympic qualifying times (QT's). "Running for QT's was the last modicum of hope many could cling to in 2020," she posted on Twitter.

"Most don't make money. Most are doing everything they can to have a shot. Why make a blanket statement when we don't know what the future holds and remove the only lasting power an athlete has in 2020?"

Christian Taylor, twice Olympic triple jump champion, welcomed the fact that the Athletes Commission of World Athletics had been consulted over the decision but thought wider opinion should have been solicited.— Reuters



### Voluntary initiative



**LONDON:** File photo shows players leaving the field during the match with Leicester City against Aston Villa at King Power Stadium. Leicester's manager Brendan Rodgers said some of his players were showing symptoms of the virus.

warned football faces economic challenges "beyond the wildest imagination of those who run it" as a result of the health emergency.

Spurs have come under pressure from fans to follow Jurgen Klopp's side in reversing their decision to use public money to pay employees.

The Reds, the European champions and the world's seventh richest club, ditched their con-

troversial plan to furlough some of their non-playing staff during the virus on Monday after coming under intense pressure from ex-players and fans. More than 60,000 people, including Prime Minister Boris Johnson who is being treated at an intensive care unit, have tested positive for COVID-19 in Britain, and more than 7,000 have died from the virus. — AFP

## Delay of Olympic qualification gets cool reception

**TOKYO:** The decision by the governing body of athletics to suspend Olympic qualification until December due to the coronavirus outbreak has received a cool reception from some Tokyo hopefuls. World Athletics announced on Tuesday that qualification for the Tokyo Olympics, which will now take place in July and August next year, would restart on Dec. 1, subject to the global situation returning to normal.

"Pretty disappointed about this decision," former Olympic steeplechase silver medalist Evan Jager posted on Twitter. "Even if COVID-19 clears up in some countries and it's safe to compete, (it) takes away a major motivation to run fast this year."

"I understand freezing the world rankings but I feel achieving the Olympic Standard should still be on the table." Measures to control the coro-

## China ex-PSG star Wang freed from virus lockdown

**SHANGHAI:** Chinese women's football star Wang Shuang will finally reunite with the national team after two months stranded at the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic in Wuhan, state media said.

The 25-year-old former Paris Saint-Germain midfielder will bolster a squad due to play off against South Korea over two legs for Asia's final qualifying place at the Tokyo Olympics, which have been postponed for a year to 2021.

In February, Wuhan native Wang was pictured kicking a ball on a rooftop while on lockdown in the city of 11 million people as she attempted to keep up her fitness.

Wuhan, where the virus was first identified, led the world with an unprecedented total lockdown to prevent the spread of the

coronavirus. On Wednesday, tens of thousands of people fled the city when a 76-day travel ban was lifted.

Xinhua news agency said that Wang and two other players stranded in Wuhan, Yao Wei and Lu Yueyun, would join the squad in Suzhou to prepare for the playoff. The first leg has been tentatively scheduled in Korea on June 4. But the trio will first undergo a further 14-day quarantine period on arrival in Suzhou, Sina Sports said.

Wang, the undoubted star of the Chinese side, has won more than 100 caps. She spent a year in the French capital with PSG before returning to Chinese football in July last year. Wang scored eight goals and contributed seven assists in 27 matches for PSG. — AFP

## Sports

# A month into lockdown, Serie A torn over return to action

## Balotelli's Brescia accept player pay cuts

**MILAN:** A month after Serie A last saw a ball-kicked football-mad Italy is torn over whether to return to action or scrap the season as the coronavirus crisis continues to keep the nation on lockdown.

Endless dates have been proposed from May, through to September and October, all depending "on when health conditions allow". The Mediterranean country has been under siege since the COVID-19 disease took a grip on February 22, and no Serie A matches have been played March 9.

In the midst of the health crisis which has claimed the lives of nearly 18,000 people, Italy's top clubs have been at loggerheads over when is best to resume this season, if ever. The Lombardy region — home to Inter Milan and AC Milan — has recorded 9,722 deaths while the neighbouring Piedmont, the home region of champions Juventus has also been hard hit.

Among the most vocal supporters of the season being scrapped are clubs located in the northern regions, such as Brescia and Torino. Brescia president Massimo Cellino warned last week his club, who are at the epicentre of Italy's outbreak, were ready to forfeit their matches if the season resumes, saying that "returning to play is pure madness".

Brescia opted for a more conciliatory tone Wednesday, saying a statement: "The resumption of the championship is a possibility that the club would like to avoid while respecting the sad reality of Brescia."

Torino president Urbano Cairo agreed: "In my opinion, the championship is over. The title

will not be awarded." But Lazio president Claudio Lotito, whose club are second, one point behind Juventus as they chase their first title in two decades, has been keen to return.

Juve are also leaning towards a return to action as they target a ninth consecutive 'Scudetto'. Juve president Andrea Agnelli, as head of the European Club Association (ECA), issued a joint letter with UEFA and European Leagues, stating: "Any decision of abandoning domestic competitions is, at this stage, premature and not justified."

Italy's sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora and Italian Football Federation (FIGC) chief Gabriele Gravina have already started to lay the groundwork for a return. Gravina met with members of the FIGC medical commission on Wednesday to analyse the situation and draw up a protocol for a resumption of activities. "If and when we have the green light for a gradual restart, the world of football must be ready," said Gravina.

"Given the role that football plays in Italian society, I am convinced that we can make an important contribution to the whole country." The date, however, remains uncertain although Gravina has considered several options.

At present May 24 seems to be the earliest and June 7 the latest, with 13 rounds of games in some cases to be played through to mid-July. With those dates in mind clubs have started to recall foreign players who had left Italy and need to respect the two weeks quarantine on their return. Inter Milan have seven players who fled the virus to be with their families including Belgian

striker Romelu Lukaku and England defender Ashley Young. With at least three weeks of preparation needed, and the current ban running until April 13, training would resume at the end of the month.

But some players remain sceptical. "We're eager to go, but we know this is a global pandemic, some things are bigger and more important than football," Roma's England defender Chris Smalling said on Twitter.

"We know there will be a lot of games to play in a short time, so we need to be ready for that. We need two or three weeks training to get back up to full speed — and then it could be a busy run of games."

The final decision will depend on the virus, with 542 reported new deaths on Wednesday in Italy, and at least 140,000 people infected.

Meanwhile, Serie A's Brescia, who want the Italian season stopped because of the coronavirus pandemic, announced on Wednesday their players have agreed to salary cuts.

In a statement addressed to season-ticket holders, president Massimo Cellino praised "the great sensitivity and responsibility shown by our players who, almost all, have accepted very quickly the proposals to reduce salaries, in order to protect the integrity of the club in such a delicate moment".

No details were given on how much players at the promoted club, who include Italian international Mario Balotelli, had agreed to forego.

The town of Brescia is at the epicentre of Italy's coronavirus crisis, with nearly 10,000 people infected by the virus. "The club would



Mario Balotelli

like to avoid resuming (the season) out of respect for the sad reality of Brescia," the team added. They were promoted to the top flight last season and are currently bottom of the table, nine points from safety. League leaders Juventus announced late last month that they had cut their players' and coach Maurizio Sarri's salaries over the period from March to June.

The Italian champions estimated the cuts would have "a positive impact of 90 million euros on the 2019/2020 financial year". The Italian footballers' association (AIC) has rejected attempts by clubs to cut salaries. — AFP

## Real Madrid players accept up to 20 percent pay cut

**MADRID:** Real Madrid players have agreed to cut their salaries by as much as a fifth, the La Liga club announced on Wednesday, as Spanish football remains on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In a statement, Real said players and coaches from the side's football and basketball teams, as well as key directors, had voluntarily agreed to the reduction, of either 10 or 20 percent, "depending on the circumstances that may affect the closing of the current 2019/20 sports season".

Real didn't say what circumstances would affect the rate of salary cut, but Spanish media reported players will receive 10 percent less if the season is completed and 20

percent less if the current campaign is terminated. The cuts will shave between 28 million and 56 million euros (\$30.4 million and \$60.8 million) off Real's salary bill. It also means the club has avoided using the partial unemployment (ERTE) scheme that cut Barcelona and Atletico Madrid players' salaries by 70 percent.

La Liga has recommended clubs take advantage of the scheme, and both Sevilla and Espanyol have also put in a request to be included on the ERTE scheme.

Over 14,000 people have died from COVID-19 in Spain, the second worst hit country from the virus after Italy, with 146,690 registered cases. — AFP

## Barca president seeks reshuffle of club board

**BARCELONA:** Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu, whose tenure has been undermined by tense relations with players this season, wants to reform the club's management because he distrusts certain directors, according to vice-president Emili Rousaud.

"Bartomeu called me and told me he wanted to change the management because he was suspicious of some of the directors, me included," Rousaud, who had been tipped to succeed Bartomeu as president, told Cadena Ser radio on Wednesday.

"He told me things had been leaked to the press that upset the players and he thought I had been critical of how the board had handled

it." The relationship between Barca's players and board has been strained for several months, with Lionel Messi's public criticism of technical secretary Eric Abidal in February just one of a number of off-field controversies.

Messi took another swipe at the Barca board last week, when confirming the squad would take a 70 percent pay cut during the coronavirus crisis.

The Argentine accused Bartomeu of undermining the players during recent negotiations.

"It never ceases to amaze us that from within the club there were those who tried to put us under the magnifying glass and tried to add pressure to do something that we always knew we would do," Messi wrote on social media.

Messi's message was soon posted on the pages of nearly all of his Barcelona teammates. The controversy further increased the pressure on Bartomeu and the Barcelona board ahead of presidential elections due next year. However, Bartomeu will not be eligible to run for re-election in 2021 having served two terms. — AFP



LOS ANGELES: File photo taken on March 5, 2020 LeBron James #23 of the Los Angeles Lakers handles the ball in a game against the Philadelphia 76ers. James said yesterday, the abrupt shut-down of the NBA season due to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic has left the Los Angeles Lakers feeling like they still have something to prove. — AFP

## James hopes Lakers can eventually rekindle their revival season

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