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Another virus death in Kuwait; 10 Kuwaitis have died abroad

40 curfew violators referred to court • Finance minister under fire over debt law

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The ministry of health yesterday reported 55 new coronavirus cases, raising the number to 1,355 cases. A new death was also reported of an 80-year-old Kuwaiti woman, raising the total number of deaths to three. Of the 1,176 cases receiving treatment, 26 are in intensive care units, nine of them in critical condition. The ministry also reported 26 new recoveries, raising the number to 176 recoveries, adding as many as 1,739 people have been discharged from quarantines.

Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah said on Monday after a Cabinet meeting that at least 10 Kuwaiti citizens have died abroad after being infected with coronavirus. A number of other deaths were reported but it has not been established if it was from the virus. The minister

provided no further details.

The interior ministry said yesterday that 40 people have been referred to the public prosecution for violating the partial nightly curfew imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. A majority of those referred are believed to be citizens, as most expats violating the curfew are normally deported. The ministry said that the prosecution released a number of those referred on a KD 1,000 bail each, adding that some of those were arrested at wedding parties, which are banned by the government.

Meanwhile, the civil aviation authority has eased restrictions on a ban on commercial passenger flights after allowing Qatar Airways to operate two flights a week from Kuwait airport. The Qatari flights are open to any expatriates who wish to depart to their home countries. The new move comes as

Kuwait prepares to launch a major air bridge starting Sunday to transport up to 50,000 Kuwaitis back home from several countries where they have been stranded because of the coronavirus.

The Cabinet on Monday approved the repatriation plan, slated to start on April 19, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah said. The prime minister also said that the country has sufficient food and medicine reserves and the government will continue to ensure such reserves are sufficient. Sheikh Ahmad said the repatriation will be carried out in phases, with the first phase lasting for three days focused on bringing Kuwaitis from GCC states and Egypt. Other stages will be launched on April 25 to bring all Kuwaitis who have expressed the desire to return.

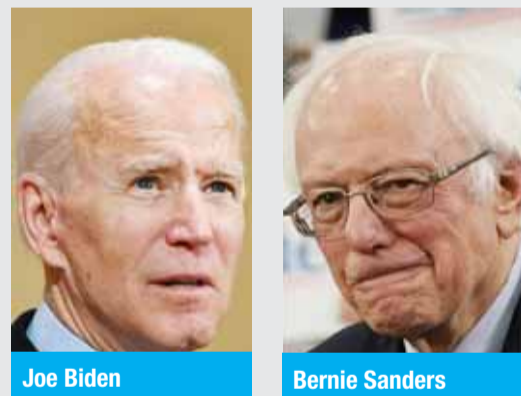
Health Minister Sheikh Basal Al-Sabah said the repatriation operation will be completed on May 7,

so citizens will spend most of the holy fasting of Ramadan and the Eid Al-Fitr in the country. He said that depending on health conditions, some arrivals will be sent to ministry-run quarantines, while the rest will be sent home provided they strictly remain isolated from others. The health minister warned all in the country that the situation is delicate and all must stay at home in order to contain the disease. The Cabinet did not discuss the issue of imposing a total curfew or expanding lockdowns to other residential areas, as was expected. This will be discussed in its next session.

The foreign ministry is still talking to authorities in Egypt and Bangladesh to allow the return of thousands of the two nationalities who have responded to a one-month amnesty by the interior ministry.

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Sanders endorses ex-rival Biden for US president



Joe Biden Bernie Sanders

WASHINGTON: Former White House candidate Bernie Sanders on Monday endorsed one-time rival Joe Biden for president, saying it was time to unite in the effort to defeat Donald Trump in November. The two veteran politicians, who each spent the past year battling for the Democratic nomination, appeared together by split-screen on Biden's livecast. "Today I am asking all Americans - I'm asking every Democrat, I'm asking every independent, I'm asking a lot of Republicans - to come together in this campaign to support your candidacy which I endorse," Sanders said.

The swift backing marked a notable change from 2016, when Sanders lost the presidential nomination race to Hillary Clinton but delayed endorsing her candidacy. That wait was seen as deeply damaging in that it exposed a divide within the Democratic Party.

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US eyes virus 'plateau'; world weighs reboot

WASHINGTON: Coronavirus deaths in the hard-hit United States were flat for a second consecutive day, with New York's governor saying the "worst is over" as many countries weigh a gradual reopening of their shattered economies. Since emerging late last year, the coronavirus pandemic has killed around 120,000 and infected nearly two million, tipping the world towards a fierce economic recession as more than half of the globe hunkers down at home.

As countries reach different stages of the coronavirus curve, debate is raging over whether to return to normal life and possibly risk a second wave of infections. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told his 1.3 billion citizens their lockdown would remain in effect until May 3 at least and France's President Emmanuel Macron extended his tight measures by another month. But Italy and Austria are reopening some shops and Spain is restarting construction and factory work while powerhouse Germany weighs restarting Europe's top economy.

In Washington, Trump stunned reporters by playing a campaign-style self-congratulatory video and bashing the media during a briefing in which

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India extends world-biggest lockdown

NEW DELHI: India's nationwide coronavirus lockdown, the biggest in the world covering 1.3 billion people, will be extended until May 3, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said yesterday. The move comes despite complaints from millions of poor, a vast underclass who have been left almost completely without support as jobs have vanished and incomes dried up. "From the economic angle, we have paid a big price," Modi said. "But the lives of the people of India are far more valuable. From the experiences of the last few days it is clear that the

path we have chosen is correct."

India's current three-week-old lockdown, in force since March 25, had been scheduled to end at midnight yesterday. Modi said there would be "limited relaxations" from April 20 for districts with no cases, and new guidelines for industry and agriculture would be released today.

The announcement comes as debate rages around the world on how to lift restrictions so that the economic carnage of the pandemic can be eased without a new spike in infections. Official figures suggest South Asian nations have so far been relatively unscathed by the epidemic, with around 10,000 cases and 339 deaths in India.

Some experts say India has not conducted enough tests and that the true number of infections is much higher.

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BANGKOK: People crowd to buy meat and fish at Khlong Toei wet market despite fears of the spread of the coronavirus yesterday. — AFP



NAGPUR, India: Guinness world record holder of the world's smallest living woman Jyoti Amge greets a police officer as she appeals citizens to stay inside their homes on Monday. — AFP

Libya unity govt seizes strategic cities from Haftar

TRIPOLI: Forces backing Libya's unity government captured two coastal cities west of Tripoli on Monday in a new blow to military commander Khalifa Haftar a year after he launched an offensive on the capital. They also routed his forces from three smaller cities, sparking rocket attacks on Tripoli that wounded at least one person and damaged homes in a residential area. "Our forces took control of Sorman and Sabratha and are

pursuing (Haftar's forces)," said a statement by Mohammed Gnuu, spokesman for the forces of the United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord.

He later reported that three smaller cities further south controlled by Haftar's forces - Al-Ajaylat, Regdaline and Al-Jmeil - had been captured by GNA fighters. An AFP video journalist saw pro-GNA forces in pick-up trucks mounted with machine guns celebrating in central Sabratha, around halfway between Tripoli and the Tunisian border. Control of war-torn Libya is largely divided between pro-GNA forces and those of eastern-based Haftar, who launched an offensive to try to capture Tripoli in April last year.

On their Facebook page, GNA forces published images of Grad rocket launch-

ers, 10 tanks and armoured vehicles they said they had captured in Sabratha and Sorman, which had been controlled by Salafist militias allied with Haftar. Mohammad Al-Gammoudi, a GNA commander on the ground, said Sorman and Sabratha had been seized after "six hours of fighting with air cover".

Libya has suffered almost a decade of conflict since longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi was toppled and killed in a 2011 uprising backed by several Western powers. The UN says hundreds have been killed and over 200,000 displaced since Haftar launched his battle for Tripoli, which quickly ground to a bloody stalemate. Haftar's forces did not immediately comment after Gnuu's announcement.

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SABRATHA, Libya: A Libyan man celebrates as fighters loyal to the UN-recognized Government of National Accord drove into this coastal city on Monday after seizing it from troops backing military commander Khalifa Haftar. — AFP

Grand repatriation plan for Kuwaitis begins April 19: PM

Cabinet approves repatriation plan for patients, students, diplomats

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah said Monday that the grand repatriation plan for Kuwaiti nationals abroad will begin on Sunday April 19. This plan will be carried out under the directives set by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and hopefully it will achieve its goal to bring citizens back home by the Holy Month of Ramadan, indicated His Highness the Prime Minister.

Speaking at a lengthy news conference, His Highness the Prime Minister said he is following up round the clock on the hard work of specialized teams tasked with taking measures against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). "There are 16 of such committees and many other teams," he revealed. Underscoring personal concern on part of His Highness the Amir and top leaders about conditions of the citizens, particularly those abroad amid the coronavirus crisis, he stated, "Our determination is grand to overcome the plight ... and we have abundant medical and food stockpiles."

Elaborating, His Highness the Prime Minister has said that he is in regular contact with the concerned ministers to resolve any emerging obstacles or issues. "We are all working hard to (resolve the issues)," he stressed. His Highness the Prime Minister has affirmed that the government is addressing issues concerning 50,000 Kuwaiti citizens in various countries across the world. "This subject is a priority for us, and we have been engaged in lengthy discussions to try reach the best solutions while preserving the health system in the country," he stated. He declared that following these lengthy discussions among the concerned officials, the government has adopted the plan for repatriating the citizens abroad — execution of which will begin on April 19.

Three groups

Meanwhile, Minister of Health Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah who spoke after the premier said the repatriated Kuwaitis would be divided into three groups, affirming that the phased process would begin on April 19 and conclude on May 7 — lasting for 19 days. He affirmed that the returning citizens would be subject to standard medical procedures against pandemics, such as measuring their temperature and conducting swab tests, before being subjected to either institutionalize or house quarantines. The first batch of the repatriates will include those who need



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's meeting on Monday. — KUNA

mobile beds and life support equipment, he added, re-appealing to families of the returnees to adhere literally to the authorities' instructions and abstain from emotional interaction with their loved ones upon their return.

Taking his turn at the news conference, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah declared that the operation would be the largest evacuation of Kuwaitis from abroad since 1991 after Kuwait was liberated of the Iraqi occupation. "So far, 35,000 Kuwaitis abroad desiring to return have registered required data on 'Ma'akom' website," the foreign minister said. He explained that in the first phase of the operation (April 19-April 21), Kuwaitis would be flown back from GCC countries, Egypt and Turkey. April 22 would be dedicated for preparing and equipping by the involved teams, he said. On April 23, flights will resume to bring back Kuwaitis who need beds and life support equipment. April 24 will be also dedicated for preparations and equipping. From April 25 till the



Around 50,000 Kuwaitis abroad

next month, the full-scale operation will be completed, bringing back citizens from more than 101 "points" throughout the world, the minister added.

Responding to a question about destiny and status of the Kuwaiti diplomats abroad, he indicated that they would come back after making sure that all Kuwaitis who wanted to leave were flown back home. Moreover, he disclosed that more than 17,000

Kuwaiti students studying abroad have posted their data on 'Ma'akom' website, however he clarified that their return is not mandatory and that each student could freely take the decision to stay or leave. He affirmed that more expatriates who breached residency law in Kuwait would fly back home, simultaneously with the flights bringing back the Kuwaitis from abroad.

Cabinet approves plan

The Cabinet, at an extraordinary session on Monday, adopted a phased process to bring back Kuwaiti citizens abroad who have remained there amid the

ongoing coronavirus crisis. The ministers, during the session, followed up on efforts for combating the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and adopted the plan to bring back home Kuwaiti citizens from all corners of the world, said Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh in a statement after the special meeting.

The session kick-started with Minister of Health and head of a team tasked with following up on the coronavirus developments briefing the ministers about latest information about the pandemic, including data and statistics included in reports of the World Health Organization. The ministers were also briefed by the Foreign Minister, who along the minister of health, presented details about the planned operation.

Later in the session, Minister of Oil, Electricity and Water Khaled Al-Fadhel briefed the ministers about the recent agreement by OPEC and non-OPEC oil producing states to slash crude production by less than 10 million barrels per day. The ministers lauded the deal that would stabilize the markets and back the global economy in the current extraordinary circumstances. Moreover, the cabinet lauded designation of Mustafa Al-Kadehmi to form a new government in Iraq, hoping the move would lead to attaining the people aspirations. — KUNA

Pandemic Diaries

Returning home



By Jamie Etheridge

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This week Kuwait will begin the process of bringing home the more than 40,000+ citizens stranded abroad. Many of these are students or young professionals, but there are also those who were on holiday when all this started and others who had work commitments or family outside Kuwait.

That the government is organizing such a massive airlift is admirable and commendable. Many governments do little to help citizens abroad; some have even refused to allow their own citizens to return home during this pandemic, effectively setting them adrift in the unknown world. Kuwait cares for its people, and in times of crisis, bands together in ways that other nations could and should look to as a model.

The return of thousands of citizens also creates an opportunity for expatriates who want to leave Kuwait and return to their home countries. The hundreds of flights that will be necessary to bring citizens into the country will be empty heading out, thus open for passengers looking for one-way tickets home.

Of course the cost of those tickets is often prohibitive, and for many, leaving Kuwait is not an option at this point. Some countries are not allowing even their own citizens to return and others are in the middle of the pandemic crisis themselves and it's safer for most people to try and wait the situation out here and hope that life returns to something akin to normal as soon as possible.

In Europe, there are already some positive signs, as a few places like Austria, Denmark and others are being cautious and taking small steps toward reopening. The key to reopening seems to be the twin Ts of testing and tracing. In essence, any place that reopens after the lockdown would need to be able to quickly test anyone who is showing symptoms and then trace, perhaps via a tracking device installed on smartphones, everyone that person has come into contact with.

It's not clear how such a system might work in Kuwait and there is also the concern of asymptomatic patients — those who show no signs of the illness but are infected and spread it. There will likely be many more days of high infection counts before we see a flattening of the curve and a return to normal life. Until then, we will have to continue staying at home in order to stay safe and hope for the best.

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 1,355 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), in addition to three deaths. With the exception of 26 cases in intensive care, all infected cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while hundreds have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 176 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, the ministry said. There are 1,176 people receiving treatment and 1,367 quarantined as of yesterday. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested thousands of people. Meanwhile, Kuwait requires all expatriates who arrived from travel on March 1 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center at Hall 6 to test people for possible infection.

Curfew

Kuwait enforced a country-wide curfew from 5:00 pm to 6:00 am until further notice. The government also locked down Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh in a bid to contain the spread of the virus and enable health workers to test inhabitants. Earlier, the government decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The government also allowed supermarkets, restaurants and shops to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are lines, the distance must be at least one meter between people. The Ministry of Commerce launched a website (www.moci.shop) to enable people to book appointments to shop at co-operative societies in their areas. The Public Authority for Industry also announced that companies can apply to evacuate their workers from Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula. To do so, they must fill a 'workers evacuation form' available on www.pai.gov.kw, and send the form via email to: Jasiri@moh.gov.kw.

Precautions

Kuwait halted all commercial flights until further notice, and has sent special flights to repatriate Kuwaitis back home from countries affected with the virus' spread. All arrivals to Kuwait from all countries are to be placed under compulsory institutional quarantine for 14 days, during which the person is monitored, and prescribed health procedures are applied, the health ministry said. Meanwhile, the Cabinet announced on April 9 the operation of all airline flights for expats who are wishing to return back to their countries. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to April 23, with work resuming on April 26, while entities providing vital services will remain open. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended

classes for March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs); first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29, before eventually suspending schools until August for grade 12 and October for other stages.

Kuwait suspended issuing entry permits and visas unless those issued through diplomatic missions. State departments have been on high alert to take precautions against the potential spread of the virus. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has taken measures to make sure that facial masks, hand sanitizers and other goods remain accessible to the public.

Amnesty

The Interior Ministry issued 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. The amnesty was issued in view of the circumstances the country is currently going through and as part of the precautionary measures taken to fight the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Individuals desiring to procure valid residencies in Kuwait and are willing to pay the fines without being subjected to investigations will be allowed to pay the fines and legalize their status if they meet the required conditions.

Special centers in Farwaniya were allocated to accommodate violators who finalize their papers pending departure. Male violators are received at Al-Muthanna primary school for boys, Farwaniya, block 1, street 122, while female violators are received at Farwaniya primary school for girls in Farwaniya, block 1, street 76. Violators are received from 8 am till 2 pm according to the following dates and nationalities: Philippines (April 1-5, 2020), Egypt (April 6-10), India (April 11-15), Bangladesh (April 16-20), Sri Lanka (April 21-25), other nationalities (April 26-30, 2020).

The Interior Ministry later opened two new locations in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh to receive residency violators from all nationalities: Female violators are received at Roufayda Al-Aslameya School - Block 4 - Street 200, while male violators are received at Naem bin Masod School - Block 4 - Street 250.

Hotlines

The Ministry of Health has set the following hotlines to receive inquiries about the coronavirus 24/7: 24970967 - 96049698 - 99048619.

The Education Ministry set the following hotlines to receive inquiries on school closures related to the anti-coronavirus measures:

- 24970967 (24/7 hotline)
- 51575591 (Capital Educational Zone)
- 51576117 (Hawally Educational Zone)
- 51576576 (Farwaniya Educational Zone)
- 51577055 (Jahra Educational Zone)
- 51577655 (Ahmadi Educational Zone)
- 51577951 (Mubarak Al-Kabeer Educational Zone)
- 51578171 (Religious Studies Department)
- 51588599 (Private Education Department)
- 51592515 (Services Department)
- 51594544 (Public Relations Department)

Medicine delivery

Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MOH) launched a new medicine delivery service for people in Kuwait, which they can use to order medications to be delivered

during curfew hours. The medications will be delivered within 72 hours after the order is submitted. To place an order, patients should send a WhatsApp to the numbers for the hospitals and medical centers as listed below. The patient should include their name, Civil ID number, hospital or clinic file number, mobile phone number and the medicine needed to the following numbers:

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

Meanwhile, all licensed pharmacies in Kuwait delivering medicine are allowed to continue their services 24 hours a day.

The Ministry of Health is also asking doctors and nurses affiliated with the private medical sector to volunteer in order to contribute to the fight against the virus. Volunteering is available through the link: <http://volunteering.q8-ehelth.com>. The ministry had closed all private clinics and medical centers effective March 22, 2020 until further notice.

Mental health assistance

The Kuwait Psychological Association (KPA) is providing consultation through the phone for people suffering from the psychological impacts of coronavirus. Different doctors are working on the hotline in different timings as follows:

- **Dr Rashed Al-Sahh:** on Monday and Wednesday 10:00 am - 1:00 pm. Call 9797-6168.
- **Dr Fahad Al-Tasha:** daily from 8:00 pm - 12:00 am. Call 9904-8258.
- **Dr Othman Al-Asfour:** daily 5:00 pm - 8:00 pm. Call 9938-5350.
- **Dr Mohammed Al-Khalidi (head of this team):** daily 9:00 am - 12:00 pm. Call 9903-6470.
- **Dr Ahmad Al-Khalidi:** daily 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 9910-7965.
- **Dr Muncera Al-Qattan:** Monday and Wednesday 9:00 am - 1:00 pm. Call 9953-3108.
- **Dr Zainab Al-Saffar:** Sunday and Thursday 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 9954-9908.
- **Dr Sameera Al-Kandari:** Tuesday 9:00 pm - 12:00 am. Call 6770-9434.
- **Dr Kawthar Al-Yaqout:** Monday and Wednesday 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 5521-0088.
- For information and other concerns, call 9401-4283.

Local

Kuwait small business owners hit hard by pandemic, face bankruptcy

Entrepreneurs fear the market will never be the same as before

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The coronavirus crisis has hit almost all businesses in Kuwait and the entire world. But small businesses have been the most affected, as for most entrepreneurs it's the only source of livelihood, and most of them will not be able to survive several months of closure. Some businesses are able to somehow operate partially with online or delivery services, but many other businesses don't have this service or they're not allowed to provide deliveries if their activities are banned by the government during the coronavirus shutdown.

Kuwait Times interviewed owners of two small businesses that were subject to complete closure, as their services cannot be delivered. Fatma Offtada, owner of By Offtada beauty salon in Sabah Al-Salem, shut her salon in early March due to the government decision. According to this decision, she is also not allowed to provide home services. Fatma launched her business less than three years ago. She took a loan of KD 25,000, which has not been repaid yet.

"I have four employees working in my small salon. As I had to close the salon, and don't have another source of income, I could only pay the staff half of their salaries. I don't have any revenues, but they also have to receive something to survive. I will pay them the rest of the salary after we open the salon again," she told Kuwait Times.

"Also, the landlord didn't inform me of any rent relief, although the salon only operated for a few days in March. After I wrote a letter to him explaining the situation, he agreed to waive the rent for April. But if this situation goes on longer, I won't be able to survive and will have to wind up my business. My business is still new and I haven't finished repaying the loan and haven't made any profits yet. I told the staff if any of them wants to leave, she can do so, but the problem is that there are no other salons open," Fatma said.

Losing clients

Abdullah Al-Hilal, Director, Business Development at Magic Mind Media and Production, spoke about the closure of his business. "I established my business in 2016, and the company began operations in 2017. We currently

have seven employees. We are gradually losing our clients - our two biggest clients were the first to stop all work until further notice. One is a government entity that went into emergency mode and the other is a local company that had an event during Ramadan that we were organizing. The travel and tourism was the first to be affected by the outbreak and was hit hard with booking cancellations reaching 90 percent, and we lost some clients. The rest of the clients followed them in March as the pandemic became more serious," he explained.

"We do have the luxury to work from home or online, but it mainly depends on the client. Nevertheless, part of our work is event management and right before the pandemic, we were finalizing two events - one before Ramadan and the other during the holy month," Hilal said. "Aside from the travel and tourism sector which was the first to be affected by the pandemic, restrictions that were imposed forced our clients to close their stores, thus leaving us without any business. For example, we have

clients in the health sector, like dental and beauty clinics, as well as in automotive repair and beauty salons," he added. Hilal believes that at this rate, they can survive for a month, but not more. "We have suppliers in various countries, and some of them have not deferred their payments. The initial losses of the company go back to the monthly agreements that stopped. This can easily be calculated. Then there's the extra work that we do for clients. For example, we manage a social media account for a dental clinic. Every month, we perform tasks for the client that we receive fees to do, like managing a digital campaign. This is the same client that was supposed to have an event in the second week of April. This is where the calculation becomes harder," he said.

"April's losses have surpassed KD 35,000, while May looks likely to be slower, depending on the monthly agreements and new tasks. As an advertising services company, we approach new clients regularly when possible and taking new clients on board is a lengthy process. This was also affected in the early stages of the pandemic. Monetarily, on a monthly average we can say we are losing between KD 10,000 to 15,000 just on our daily services, not counting the products that we import from different countries upon finalizing a deal with both the government



KUWAIT: This file photo shows empty streets in Kuwait City during curfew hours. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

and the private sectors," Hilal told Kuwait Times.

Govt measures

The measures by the government are correct, even though they will last much longer than expected. "We have always stayed away from loans for various reasons. However, now because of the current situation, we will be forced to take a loan under specific conditions. As per my experience in the banking field, a commercial loan that will be provided through a bank will go through many stages before approval and will only pressure the company in the future. In this state of emergency, the better solution is to provide grants. Grants are treated in a different way than commercial loans and that is what the rest of the world is doing. Some countries are even making this a nonreturnable grant if it is used to pay salaries of employees," Hilal said.

"Another issue that many companies will face including ours is the company papers. Before the pandemic, we were processing our papers at the ministry, as well as adding more staff to our team. The government should consider all cases and provide solutions that will help the companies and not hurt them. The biggest challenge is entering the market again and working with new clients after the pandemic," he noted.

Hilal doesn't think the market will ever be the same as it was. "The fear from the pandemic will still be there. We may regain our clients, but we have lost seasonal activities and a large portion of the yearly income. The travel and tourism industry will need another six months at least to recover. Some of our clients will have a hard time regaining the trust of customers, like the automotive industry. Others like health clinics will be fine, since their customers are very loyal," he concluded.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed



Local

Amnesty: Today final day for Bangladeshi nationals, Indian applicants start tomorrow

Over 7,000 residency violators applied in first ten days



KUWAIT: Bangladeshi nationals queue up outside a school in Farwaniya which was turned into a center to receive applications wishing to avail the amnesty. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



KUWAIT: Bangladeshi nationals headed for the third day on Monday to centers set up by the Ministry of Interior to receive expatriates without valid residencies who are wishing to avail 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. Today is the final day to receive Bangladeshi applicants, after which Indians will be able to apply on April 16 - 20,

followed by Sri Lankans on April 21 - 25 and other nationalities on April 26 - 30. Egyptian nationals were received on April 6 - 10, following a five-day period to receive applicants from the Philippines. The Interior Ministry announced that 5,241 Egyptians applied to avail the amnesty on April 6 - 10, while over 2,000 Filipinos applied on April 1 - 5.

Violators are received from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm at the following locations: Male violators are received

at Al-Muthanna primary school for boys, Farwaniya, block 1, street 122, while female violators are received at Farwaniya primary school for girls in Farwaniya, block 1, street 76. Residency violators from all nationalities are also received in two difference locations in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh as follows: Female violators are received at Roufayda Al-Aslameya School - Block 4 - Street 200, while male violators are received at Naeem bin Masod School - Block 4 - Street 250.

IN MY VIEW

United in arms



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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Sometimes we must look at the positives even during crises or adverse conditions that may affect our lives significantly. Back in August 1990, Kuwait was invaded by an army that was led by arrogant commanders who did not have respect for anything, including people and their right to live in peace and security. At that time, there was political tension in the air, yet when the tragedy of the invasion hit, it was unbelievable how the fabric of the society held together firmly and in an admirable fashion, and people from all backgrounds and affiliations cooperated and worked as one - from helping in hospitals to operating bakeries, from providing foodstuff to collecting trash and leftovers, and because of that, the country remained standing on its feet.

Now we have a crisis of a different type, because as it was said before, we are fighting a ferocious invisible enemy, which if given the opportunity, will attack viciously without mercy. That is why governments are taking measures that seem tough on the surface, but are for our own good and health.

People at this time are highly organized and many volunteer teams are registered under the umbrella of the social affairs ministry and have received enough training. These teams are carrying out many types of services in cooperatives, supermarkets, hospitals and even in areas that are under total lockdown. The teams are performing as asked and have a polite approach in the majority of cases, and are making sure that people use hand sanitizers, gloves and masks, and provide them. Some teams go to certain areas to distribute food items and meals, while others help with providing medicine and support to the elderly and those in need of help.

Once again we must join these people who are working day and night to fight this enemy by complying with instructions and measures, so we can restore life back to normal - free of the disease and free of fear. In fact our compliance is the strongest and most important potent weapon and remedy that can be used in our fight, because if we prevent the virus from moving between us and from one person to another, its survival chances are nil.

Please maintain social distancing, stay home as long as you can and go out only when it is absolutely necessary, wash your hands thoroughly and more often, make sure your shoes stay outside, sterilize your phone, keep grocery bags outside and empty them in other containers and wash them. Even the clothes you wear outdoors should be sterilized or washed to remove any slight chance of contamination.

I know this will sound familiar but it does not hurt to remind and put emphasis on these acts that will prevent further damage. Finally, we must not do ourselves harm, as Allah told us in the Holy Quran: "And spend in the way of Allah and do not throw (yourselves) with your (own) hands into destruction (by refraining). And do good: indeed Allah loves doers of good". - (2-195).



'Infected' building fire an arson: KFSD

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Investigations into a fire reported recently in Mirqab was an arson, Kuwait Fire Service Directorate (KFSD) announced yesterday. A fire was reported last week in a building that was evacuated due to suspicions of cases infected with the novel coronavirus being there. The fire was put out by Madina and Hilali fire stations' men, KFSD said.

Separately, Airport customs officers foiled an attempt to smuggle nearly two kilograms of drugs hidden inside a shipment that came through air cargo. An inspector suspected a parcel arriving from China. Drugs Control General Department was contacted to continue investigations and identify the person who imported the parcel.



KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Service Directorate men inspect the scene of the fire.

Illegal workers arrested in Wafra crackdown

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Upon instructions from Manpower Authority Director Ahmed Al-Moussa the joint committee following up the status of expat laborers led by deputy director for manpower protection affairs Mubarak Al-Azmi inspected several farms in Wafra agricultural area. The inspection campaign resulted in arresting a number of illegal laborers who had been accommodated inside farms, filing a number of citations against citizens authorized to utilize these plots and filing a number of citations for violating health and safety conditions. Accordingly, and as part of efforts exerted by the manpower authority in collaboration with various relevant government bodies, Azmi urged relevant departments to suspend the files of the violators.

Private clinics

Kuwait Medical Association (KMA) and Kuwait Dental Association (KDA) announced discussing the issue of reopening private clinics and medical centers with Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah. A statement was issued by both associations after the minister's meeting with KMA Chairman Dr Ahmad Al-Enezi, KMA Secretary General Dr Salem Al-Kandari and KDA Chairman Dr Mohammed Dashti.

The statement explained that the meeting discussed proposals on how to re-operate private medical facilities, as they are needed now to reduce the burden shouldered by public hospitals. Both associations stressed that Sheikh Basel expressed full understanding of the points discussed and promised to consider the suggestions very soon.

The meeting also discussed medical associations' role in fighting COVID-19 through volunteers, charity committees, effective contribution in quarantines, hospitals and dealing with passengers arriving or departing through various airport terminals. Notably, in view of the current health situations, MoH closed all private clinics and medical centers effective March 22, 2020 until further notice.

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Local

Kuwaiti students in US are part of great tradition of educational cooperation: Envoy

US Envoy lauds Amir's leadership, commitment to humanitarian issues

KUWAIT: US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski said her country attached great importance to the safety of approximately 12,000 Kuwaitis at US universities who could continue their study online from Kuwait. "To those students, I send them my greetings and best wishes, and would like them to know that we are thinking of them during these challenging times," she said, referring to the global combat against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). "These students are part of a great tradition of scholarship and educational cooperation between our two countries," Ambassador Romanowski said in an interview yesterday. "Universities in the United States are mostly operating through virtual learning programs right now, so some of these students may return to Kuwait to finish out the school year from here. Regardless of where they decide to weather this storm, I want to wish them good health and success," she explained.



and history, and the future of our two countries will continue to be intertwined. The current COVID-19 crisis has made it hard for me to continue to meet people and really get to know the country. I'm looking forward to the time when things will open up and I will be able to get out and really get to know Kuwait."

"The people of the United States and Kuwait have a long and enduring friendship, and I look forward to strengthening those bonds even further," she stated. "It was an honor to present my credentials to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on February 11. I was pleased to congratulate him on Kuwaiti National Day and the 14th anniversary of his ascendancy. I reaffirmed the United States' commitment to our shared security interests and to strengthening our bilateral relationship under our strategic dialogue. I also thanked him for Kuwait's leadership in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), where Kuwait has played an especially important role as a mediator in the ongoing rift." "His Highness the Amir's leadership on regional concerns and his commitment to humanitarian issues are well known. He is a great friend of the United States and an important ally. I look forward to working with him and his government on issues touching both our countries and the region during my time as US Ambassador to Kuwait," she affirmed.

Ambassador Romanowski commended the US-Kuwait partnership as "a unique partnership that has withstood the test of time," saying, "Our relationship is rooted in our shared values, interests, and vision for the future."

"The US-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue has served as one of the important frameworks to expand the strategic partnership between our countries and strengthen our political, economic, cultural, and military ties. I look forward to

continuing to strengthen cooperation across our governments in education, healthcare, transportation, cybersecurity, and many other fields," she said.

Joint combat

Commenting on the joint combat against COVID-19, she said, "Both of our governments have, as our first priorities, the protection of our citizens. We have worked closely together to accomplish that goal for both countries. We have worked together to organize flights to help American and Kuwaiti citizens return home. Several flights have been organized so far, and we anticipate more will occur in the future," she noted.

"The American businesses are world leaders in developing life-saving pharmaceutical products, including vaccines and the development of cutting-edge medical devices. They are focused now on the global fight against COVID-19 and are already producing breakthroughs in, for example, rapid testing. Our two governments will continue to coordinate on bringing these new technologies to Kuwait as quickly as possible," the senior diplomat revealed.

On Kuwait's response to the pandemic, she said, "The Kuwaiti government has rapidly responded to prevent the spread of COVID-19 both in Kuwait and beyond. I remain grateful for the dedication and sacrifice of Kuwait's public servants and health providers who vigilantly stand ready on the front lines to protect the safety and

well-being of residents in Kuwait. The Kuwaiti government has also kept the public well-informed about the evolving COVID-19 situation."

"As usual, Kuwait and the US are leaders in international humanitarian support. I want to commend Kuwait on its donations to international efforts to overcome the global threat of COVID-19," Ambassador Romanowski remarked. Dealing with the US contribution to the global fight against the pandemic, she said the US government recently provided another \$225 million in health, humanitarian, and economic assistance to further boost response efforts worldwide. "This new assistance follows the nearly \$274 million in aid already deployed by the US government against COVID-19. It also builds upon more than \$140 billion in total US health assistance alone provided globally over the last 20 years," she pointed out.

High level meeting

Recalling her meetings with Kuwait Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah earlier this month, she said, "We discussed many issues, including Kuwait's proactive response to COVID-19 and regional events and issues. I thanked the Deputy Foreign Minister for the government's efforts to ensure the US Embassy remains operational during the crisis. During our latest meeting on April 9, we discussed coordination of efforts for Kuwait to obtain new healthcare technology being developed in the United States to combat COVID-19."



US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina Romanowski

"I am extremely appreciative of the unique friendship that we have with the Kuwaiti government that allows us to have these frequent and open conversations," she added. With regard to the evolving situation in the US, she said her country has taken the pandemic very seriously, echoing President Trump statement on Friday that "the American society is deploying every scientific, governmental, medical, and military resource to defeat the virus." Concluding, she said the special and strong relationship between United States and Kuwait "will help get us through these challenging times; we are fighting COVID-19 together and working to build a strong future for both of our nations." — KUNA

US citizens in Kuwait

Asked on the evacuation of US nationals in Kuwait who might opt to go home, she said, "There are thousands of US citizens in Kuwait. As of today, less than two hundred have left. Other US citizens may decide to depart Kuwait as additional flights become available, but I expect many will stay here while they wait for the situation to stabilize. We appreciate the cooperation of the Kuwaiti authorities at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation and Kuwait Airways in working with the US Embassy on flights to repatriate American citizens who wanted to go home," Ambassador Romanowski pointed out.

On her mission in Kuwait, she said, "Since I arrived in Kuwait as the US Ambassador at the end of January, I have been impressed with how warm and welcoming the Kuwaiti people have been. Kuwait has a rich culture

Airlines plan flights for expats to return home

KUWAIT: The Department General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) announced through its circular no (2020/45) that it would receive the requests of airlines to conduct flights for evacuation from Kuwait. Cabinet ministers accepted on April 9 the operation of all airline flights for expats who are wishing to return back to their countries.

Lufthansa German Airlines planned for a commercial flight tomorrow, leaving Kuwait to four cities: Frankfurt, Chicago, Newark, and Toronto.

It published the prices as follows:

- Frankfurt: KD 361
- Chicago: KD 580
- Newark: KD 523
- Toronto: KD 540

On the other hand, Jazeera Airways announced a special flight from Kuwait to Frankfurt for EU nationals and transit passengers for KD 200 one way ticket. Qatar Airways announced two daily flights from Kuwait to selected destinations via Doha, starting from yesterday till May 30, 2020.



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KUWAIT: People arrive at the Central Blood Bank to donate blood on Monday. —Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



Could the new coronavirus weaken 'anti-vaxxers'?

Gantz, Netanyahu given 48 hours to form unity government

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MAKKAH: An aerial view shows a deserted boulevard in the Saudi holy city of Makkah during the novel coronavirus pandemic crisis. — AFP

Deportations could fuel COVID-19 spread

Saudi Arabia deports nearly 3,000 Ethiopian migrants

ADDIS ABABA: Saudi Arabia has deported nearly 3,000 Ethiopian migrants in recent days, despite concerns that such operations could hasten the spread of the coronavirus, the United Nations says. Since mid-March, the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) has registered 2,870 Ethiopian returnees, all but 100 of whom were sent back from Saudi Arabia, IOM spokesman Alemayehu Seifeselessie said.

A humanitarian worker familiar with the deportations, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, said most of the returnees had arrived from Saudi Arabia in the past 10 days. "Large-scale migratory movements which are not planned make the transmission of the virus much more likely to continue. We are therefore calling for the temporary suspension of large-scale deportations," Catherine Sozi, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Ethiopia, said in a statement.

The migrants are kept in detention facilities in Saudi Arabia before being flown back to Ethiopia,

and it is unclear how thoroughly Saudi authorities are screening them for the virus. The Ethiopian government had requested that such deportations be halted until it could set up 30 quarantine centers in Addis Ababa. Sozi said in position paper seen Monday by AFP. But they have continued even though "only seven quarantine centers can host returnees" and "much work remains" to make Ethiopian quarantine centers compliant with World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, Sozi wrote.

The Ethiopian Public Health Institute on Monday referred questions about the deportations to the country's foreign ministry, which did not respond to a request for comment. Later on Monday night, Foreign Minister Gedu Andargachew took to Twitter to

criticize not Saudi Arabia but rather the Ethiopian migrants and the traffickers who help them go abroad.

"Saudi Arabia and other countries are fed up both with our human traffickers and migrants. This shame has to stop through the joint effort of families and law enforcement personnel," Gedu said in his post. Ethiopia has reported just 74 cases of COVID-19 and three deaths, but testing remains limited and experts fear the country's weak health system could quickly become overwhelmed.

Migrants 'very vulnerable'

Ethiopians have long looked to Saudi Arabia as an escape from poor economic prospects and state repression, hoping to find work despite not having legal status. To get there, many board overcrowded boats

that are at constant risk of sinking during sea crossings that can last up to 24 hours.

Up to half a million Ethiopians were in Saudi Arabia when officials there launched a crackdown on illegal migration in 2017, according to the IOM. Since then, around 10,000 Ethiopians on average have been deported monthly, including in January and February. The humanitarian worker said there was a two-week break in deportations beginning around the time Ethiopia announced its first COVID-19 case on March 13.

But flights have since resumed despite the fact that Ethiopia is straining to accommodate the returnees. "The quarantine measures currently in place need to be improved, and the current medical staff needs to be increased and better prepared and equipped to assist... all newly arrived migrants," the aid worker said. "These migrants are very vulnerable. They have undertaken an extremely dangerous journey and many arrive in Ethiopia with high medical and mental health needs." —AFP



UN International Organization for Migration raises alarm

COVID: Failures in Ecuador a warning for LatAm

GUAYAQUIL: With hundreds of bodies left decaying in homes for days due to lack of space in the city's overwhelmed morgues and hospitals, the coronavirus has struck a blow to Ecuador's economic capital Guayaquil, now a symbol of the chaos the pandemic can unleash among Latin America's poor. The Pacific port city has become the epicenter of South America's struggle as the pandemic gradually tightens its grip on the region.

In Guayaquil, the stench of death floats around the hospitals. Long lines of vehicles form outside the cemeteries, loaded with cardboard coffins. For days, hundreds of bodies were left at home, or in the streets where they fell, wrapped in black plastic. Hampered by a strict 15-hour curfew, funeral services were overwhelmed and the health sector, lacking funds and personnel, simply collapsed.

Nearly 800 corpses have been removed from homes in the city over the past couple of weeks, a government official announced late Sunday. The grim task of removal has been handed to a special force of troops and police hastily set up last week, in response to videos posted on social media by panicked residents of bodies lying in the streets. "The number that we have collected from homes with the special force has exceeded 700," said the head of the force Jorge Wated, who is also the government spokesman.

Wated wrote on Twitter later that the number was 771. Added to 631 bodies in hospital morgues, that makes more than 1,400 awaiting burial. And worse is to come. Authorities in this small South American country of 17.5 million predict up to 3,500 deaths from COVID-19 in the coming months. Guayas province, of which Guayaquil is the capital, has 73 per-



GUAYAQUIL: View of patients being treated for COVID-19, at the field hospital of the IESS Hospital Los Ceibos in Guayaquil, Ecuador during the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

cent of Ecuador's more than 7,500 cases and 335 deaths.

Vulnerable port

Guayaquil, the center of the country's economy and a key Pacific port, appeared vulnerable to the virus from the start. As a key hub, travel to and from Europe and the United States is especially intense in February and March, the main school holiday period. It was there that Ecuador's first case was detected in February, in an elderly woman returning from Spain. Some half a million Ecuadorans reside in Spain and Italy, which are among the countries worst hit by the virus. Many emigrated to Europe during the country's financial crisis in the 1990s.

Negligence

The problems were compounded by government negligence. Ecuador "reacted late" to the pandemic, according to Daniel Simancas, an epidemiologist at the Equinox University of Technology in Quito. "This led to the devastating consequences that we have seen. The authorities themselves have apologized for the lack of strategies in the

management of corpses, and of forecasting of what was needed in medical materials," Simancas said. There were also delays in purchasing test kits, coupled with a weak epidemiological surveillance plan. The "cultural broth" of the port city aggravated the crisis, he said.

Inequality

Although Guayas is the most productive province in the country, more than 11 percent of Guayaquil's population is living below the poverty line, according to official figures released in December. Unemployment and under-employment affects 20 percent of the working age population. "The people want to go to work and this is due to informal employment," where there is no social safety net, according to economist Alberto Acosta Burneo. Guayaquil native Carlos Tutiven, a sociologist at the University of Casa Grande, points to massive inequalities in the city. No government policy "has been powerful enough to solve the inequity" in a city where the villas of the wealthy exist cheek-by-jowl with shantytowns, he said. —AFP

Tornadoes bring deaths, destruction

WASHINGTON: Tornadoes ripped through the southern United States, killing at least 32 people and leaving behind splintered buildings and downed powerlines, officials and US media said Monday. Twisters caused catastrophic damage Easter Sunday and early Monday morning as storms moved through a region stretching from Texas to Georgia, prompting the National Weather Service to issue its highest level of tornado alert.

Images showed lines of smashed, roofless houses where tornadoes had blasted through, many homes just piles of rubble sitting atop foundations. Aircraft parked at a regional airport in Monroe, Louisiana were piled on top of each other. "By the grace of God, early reports show only a few minor injuries,"

Monroe Mayor Jamie Mayo said on Twitter, and the city's account later posted pictures of downed power lines.

In neighboring Mississippi, however, at least 11 people were killed, according to the state's emergency management agency. The Weather Channel said at least 32 people had died across the region, combining local tolls. There were nine people who died in South Carolina, the outlet reported, citing the state's governor Henry McMaster, and they reported one death in North Carolina. Seven people were reported to have been killed when tornadoes hit a mobile home park near the Georgia-Tennessee border.

"There's been loss of life, there's been significant loss of property," Tennessee Governor Bill Lee said Monday, according to the Chattanooga Times Free Press. The National Weather Service in the state found damage caused by winds estimated to be up to 145 miles (235 kilometers) per hour. The Weather Channel reported one person in Arkansas was killed when a tree fell on a house, plus two other deaths in Alabama. —AFP



SOUTH CAROLINA: People walk in front of a home destroyed by a tornado near Nixville, South Carolina. —AFP

International

Angry Trump denies plan to dismiss 'coronavirus doctor'

Sailor from US aircraft carrier dies of COVID-19

WASHINGTON: A furious, aggrieved President Donald Trump has dismissed rumors that he was going to fire his top medical advisor on the coronavirus pandemic but launched new fights with the Democrats and the media ahead of the high-stakes reopening of the shuttered US economy.

Unusually, the evening briefing at the White House began with a statement by the internationally renowned Dr Anthony Fauci, seeking to defuse speculation that he had fallen out with the Republican president. Referring to a CNN interview on Sunday in which he said that earlier mitigation measures would have dampened the escalation of the COVID-19 crisis in the United States, Fauci explained that he'd been answering a "hypothetical."

Fauci explained his reference in the interview to "pushback" against shutting down the economy—a remark interpreted widely as signaling that Trump was reluctant to take drastic action—as the "wrong choice of words." Trump, who on Sunday fueled speculation by retweeting a critical comment with the hashtag #FireFauci, sought to draw a line under the latest White House turmoil. "I like him," he said of Fauci. "I hear I'm going to fire him. I'm not gonna fire him, I think he's a wonderful guy."

But Trump then launched into a sustained assault on other targets, demonstrating his frustration with accusations that he has mishandled the crisis. With his reelection in November a tight contest against Democrat Joe Biden, Trump is under huge pressure both to crush the pandemic's spread and to rescue the world's biggest economy, which has been paralyzed by social distancing and other virus mitigation measures.



Dr Fauci seeking to defuse speculation

Incensed at what he considers to be unfriendly media coverage, Trump ripped into The New York Times, CNN and other major outlets. "The problem is the press doesn't cover it the way it should," he said of widespread perceptions that the US coronavirus response has been slow and hampered by inefficiencies. Trump said he had been "brutalized" by the media.

Then, in a first for the daily briefings - which have taken an increasingly political tone after having initially been dedicated to informing the public about the coronavirus - Trump made reporters in the room watch a video compilation of officials and others praising his work. Pressured afterward by a CBS News journalist about a long pause before the decision to shut down the economy, Trump lashed out: "You're disgraceful." "You know you're a fake," he told the reporter, seated a few feet away.

Attack on media

The next phase of the crisis is imminent, with Trump saying he will announce Tuesday the team preparing the reopening of the economy. Refusing to give a date for the reopening, Trump hinted that areas with less coronavirus could be allowed to open earlier, in a staggered operation. He said he was "very close" to having a detailed plan. But for weeks, the White House has given mixed messages over whether the federal government or states should lead the coronavirus response. Earlier Monday, the governors of California, Oregon and Washington states announced they were coming up with their own coordinated plan for easing social distancing.



HAVANA: A cat is seen on Havana's Cathedral Square. Havana's Cathedral Square is one of the places most frequented by tourists in the Cuban capital, now isolated by restrictions imposed by authorities to fight the spread of COVID-19 in the area. — AFP

Soviet Union, and stipulates that the embargo must stay in place until democracy is established in Cuba. The act "permits the export of healthcare products—medical equipment, medical instruments, medical supplies and pharmaceuticals," said John Kavulich, president of the US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council.

He cited exports worth \$1.1 million in 2019, \$3.5 million in 2018 and \$5.7 million in 2017, and which included penicillin, insulin, dental surgery equipment and ultrasounds, among other medical items. But things are not quite that straightforward, including the shipment of medicine and medical equipment from countries other

than the United States.

'Fear of sanctions'

Swiss NGO MediCuba, which backs Cuban projects to treat HIV and cancer, knows all about these complications. A few months back, its bank Postfinance refused to transfer funds to Cuba, citing fears of sanctions that have been reinforced since Donald Trump became US president. Since May 2019, Title 3 of the Helms-Burton Act threatens sanctions against anyone doing business with entities that were nationalized during the 1959 revolution, a definition sufficiently fluid to worry Cuba's overseas partners. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci speaks as US President Donald Trump listens during the daily briefing on the novel coronavirus in the Brady Briefing Room at the White House. — AFP

Sailor dies of COVID-19

Meanwhile, a sailor who was aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier died Monday of COVID-19, the first fatality from nearly 600 confirmed cases among its crew, the US Navy said. The sailor, who tested positive on March 30, was discovered unresponsive on April 9 and placed in the intensive care unit of the navy's hospital in Guam, where the Roosevelt is docked.

The death came six days after Thomas Modly resigned as acting navy secretary over his mishandling of an outbreak on the Roosevelt, one of two US aircraft carriers in the western Pacific.

Modly had earlier fired the Roosevelt's captain, Brett Crozier, after the officer's warning that the shipboard outbreak could dangerously incapacitate

much of the crew became public. Crozier had sought to evacuate most of the ship's 4,800 crew after it stopped in Guam on March 27, to test them and sterilize the vessel, but the idea was rejected by his superiors.

With the number of proven cases approaching 100, on March 30 the veteran captain wrote an unclassified, widely-distributed letter addressed to his superiors that quickly leaked to his hometown newspaper, the San Francisco Chronicle. "The spread of the disease is ongoing and accelerating," Crozier wrote. "We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die." Both Modly and Defense Secretary Mark Esper expressed anger that Crozier had violated the Pentagon's chain of command, and they insinuated that the leak to the media was deliberate. — Agencies

Calls to loosen sanctions as Cuba battles pandemic

HAVANA: As the deadly coronavirus spreads across Cuba, with 726 cases recorded by Monday, a growing chorus of voices is calling for an easing of the decades-long US embargo. During the pandemic, the embargo is "even more cruel" and having a more harmful impact than ever, said Nestor Marimon, head of international relations at the ministry of health.

Marimon and others say that while the blockade may not prevent the delivery of medical supplies, it severely complicates the process. The government said that a recent shipment of masks, testing kits and ventilators that had been offered by Jack Ma, founder of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba, could not make it to the Communist-run island because the US shipping company was worried about US sanctions being imposed.

The embargo was imposed in 1962 to "deny resources to the Castro regime," resources which could be "used to control & abuse the rights of the Cuban people and interfere in countries around region," an implicit reference to Venezuela, said Michael Kozak, the Assistant Secretary of State in charge of Latin American affairs. Since 1992, medicinal supplies have been exempted from the sanctions, as long as they are used exclusively to treat the general population.

The Cuba Democracy Act was adopted when the Cuban economy was in free-fall after the collapse of its main backer, the



PARIS: A jogger runs on an empty boulevard past the Paris' Cathedral Notre Dame at the sunrise on the eve of the first anniversary of the violent fire that destroyed a large part of the monument. — AFP

And the fragile structure remains at risk despite the massive wooden beams propping up the arches and gables. Authorities had to halt work several times over the winter when winds surpassed 40 kilometers per hour. The 60 to 70 workers normally on site have not even removed the tangled web of metal scaffolding tubes that fused together in

the inferno, which erupted during renovation work on the roof.

Until they do, they cannot install a more durable temporary roof to protect the church's priceless artworks from rain. Although investigators have still not determined the cause of the fire, prosecutors suspect faulty electrical wiring or a poorly extinguished cigarette. — AFP

Refugees helping Portugal

LISBON: Tired and hungry, nurse Nuno Delicado had a pleasant surprise when a local Syrian restaurant sent food to the Lisbon hospital where he has been battling the coronavirus outbreak. But it was the humbling story behind those who cooked the meals that left him surprised.

The Tayybeh restaurant is the brainchild of a refugee couple who fled war-torn Syria years ago. Since mid-March, Ramia Abdalghani and Alan Ghumim, both 36, have been offering free food to health workers fighting the pandemic in the capital. "We were helped by people who lived through a dramatic situation," 33-year-old Delicado said. "It was a big life lesson for all of us. "It showed us that as a society we must be there for each other," he said.

Portugal has more than 16,900 confirmed cases of the virus and 535 reported deaths. Most health workers no longer have time to prepare their meals at home and, with hospital cafeterias shut due to a nationwide lockdown, they have been

relying on restaurants like Tayybeh for food, Delicado said. The couple moved to Portugal four years ago but it was only last year, after a few other ventures, that they opened the restaurant in Lisbon, where they live with their two children.

They wanted to show the Portuguese what Syrian food was all about. "We are not only tanks and shotguns. We have a culture, historic cities, we have so many things - that's what we try to show our customers," Alan said. They felt at home as soon as they landed in Portugal, he said, so when the coronavirus hit they wanted to do their bit to help their new community. "When you flee a war, you feel the disaster but you also realize who is there for you," Alan said. "So in all things we do here in Portugal we try to give back to the people who welcomed us with open arms."

Health workers just need to call, tell the restaurant how much food they need and the couple gets to work. They make everything from the popular Daoud Basha to creamy hummus. Workers can collect the food straight from the restaurant, day or night. On their Facebook page, the restaurant owners wrote: "We want to thank all medical teams who deserve a restful family dinner at the end of the day so they can return to the battlefield they are facing for all of us every day." — Reuters

Getting virus test in Wuhan: Fast, cheap, easy

By Brenda Goh

WUHAN: Coronavirus tests can be difficult to come by in many countries including in hard-hit parts of the United States and Britain, but in Wuhan, the Chinese epicenter of the pandemic, they are fast, cheap and easy to get. My colleagues and I had just arrived in the central city where the novel coronavirus emerged in humans late last year, and as a foreigner I was told that I was required to take a nucleic test to prove that I was free of the potentially deadly flu-like virus.

A government official escorted me to the test site, a table outside the entrance of a shuttered hotel. A single medical worker sat there, dressed in a zippered-up hazmat suit and goggles. She asked for my personal details and told me to sit. She then stuck a swab down my throat, nearly triggering a gag, and then it was over.

"You'll get your results in about one and a half days," the official said. The test, while not pleasant, took less than three seconds. Wuhan is testing liberally as it tries to get back up and run-

ning after lifting a 76-day lockdown last week. The term "nucleic acid test" has become a familiar one in the city of 11 million people, where many companies are asking workers to present test results before they can return to work, although it is not mandatory.

At one Wuhan hospital, people only need to spit into a test tube. That test costs 260 yuan (\$37) and results are available by mobile app. Since Feb. 21, 930,315 tests have been carried out in Wuhan, according to government data. "Testing is a good thing," said Zhao Yan, an emergency medicine doctor and vice president of Wuhan's Zhongnan Hospital told reporters on a government-organized trip last week. "If you're an enterprise with 500 employees and you want to start working again, you test everybody."

Across China, officials are simplifying and speeding up the process to obtain a nucleic acid test, even though questions persist about its accuracy. Some Chinese doctors have pushed to raise requirements for discharging hospitalized patients from two negative nucleic acid tests to three. Cities including Beijing have required some arriving travelers to present test results when entering. China has not yet indicated it will require testing for large swathes of the population. The official sent my test result to me by text message. It was negative. — Reuters

Lockdown stalls the Notre-Dame rebirth

PARIS: Perched over the gaping roof of Notre-Dame, a crane stands idle above the silent Paris cathedral, where repair work has ground to a halt one year after the monstrous blaze that nearly destroyed one of the world's most revered monuments. Millions around the world watched in horror last April 15 as firefighters battled through the night to save the 13th-century masterpiece from the fire, which ravaged its roof and toppled the steeple.

French President Emmanuel Macron promised a herculean effort to have the UNESCO heritage site restored within five years, in time for the Paris Olympics of 2024. But France's lockdown to combat the coronavirus—which has forced a full suspension of work at the site—is making that goal even more unlikely than before. Work had already been delayed for months by decontamination efforts after more than 300 tons of lead from the roof melted in the blaze, covering the site in toxic particles that have proven hard to remove.

International

Could the new coronavirus weaken 'anti-vaxxer' group?

Some opponents vow to resist any potential vaccine

LISBON: An American mother-of-three is a long-time member of "anti-vaxxer" groups online: a small but vocal global community that believes vaccines are a dangerous con and refuse to immunize themselves or their children. But COVID-19 is shaking her views. The woman who would identify herself only as Stephanie, citing a fear of reprisals from committed anti-vaxxers, says she is now 50:50 on taking a vaccine should one be discovered for the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus.



Critics see no big change in views on vaccines

"I've definitely thought about it," she told Reuters by phone from the United States, also expressing frustration at what she considers the anti-vax community's downplaying of the pandemic's seriousness. "We're all being affected by this virus, schools closing, young people in hospital, and they still say it's a hoax." As the world's scientists and pharmaceutical companies seek a cure for the coronavirus, other anti-vaxxers are gearing up for a fight against any potential new vaccine.

"Refuse, demonstrate," said a Briton on Facebook in response to a post asking people how they would react if a vaccine was made mandatory. But some virologists say the quest for a vaccine is so widely supported that resistance will be eroded. The latest national surveys by pollster ORB International for the Vaccine Confidence Project (VCP), which monitors attitudes to immunization, appear to support this idea.

In France, where a 2018 poll showed one in three people did not view vaccines as safe, just 18% would refuse a coronavirus vaccine now, according to the VCP poll of around 1,000 people on March 18, a day after France locked down. In Australia, the VCP's figure

was also 7%, while Britain, where about 2,000 people were polled, and Austria registered 5% opposition in polls there a week later. "If a vaccine were made available tomorrow, everyone would jump to get it," said Laurent-Henri Vignaud, who co-authored a history of France's anti-vax movement.

That view was challenged by Mary Holland, vice-chair of American non-profit group Children's Health Defense, which is critical of vaccination in the United States. "I don't think this virus fundamentally changes people's deeply held concerns about vaccines," she said. "I will not be injected with anything" Although the term "anti-vax" is sometimes associated with conspiracy theories, many people are simply concerned about side-effects or industry ethics.

Globally, one person in five does not view vaccines as safe or is unsure, according to a 2018 survey by the Wellcome Trust health fund. In China, where the COVID-19 disease caused by the novel coronavirus originated, surveys by VCP researchers show safety is an important cause of concern. Several scandals eroded trust, including in 2018 when a unit of China's vaccine maker Changsheng Bio-technology Co Ltd was heavily fined for falsifying data for a rabies vaccine. The company said it was "deeply sorry" for the incident.

Online discussions tracked by Reuters - including closed Facebook pages with more than 200,000 members, Twitter feeds such as the Children's Health Defense and YouTube videos totaling over 700,000 views - showed considerable mistrust that a rushed vaccine would be improperly tested. VCP director Heidi Larson said that was also the main reason for concern around the vaccine against the H1N1 swine flu pandemic in 2009.

A quickly produced swine flu vaccine in 1976 led to about one in 100,000 people developing Guillain-Barre syndrome, a paralyzing immune-system disorder, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Some 115 coronavirus vaccine candidates are being developed by institutes and drug-makers, according to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation, a global alliance financing and coordinating the development of vaccines.

"I will not be injected with anything, especially a fast-tracked vaccine," added American Vicki Barneck,



BERLIN: People sit in the sun along the banks of the Landwehr Canal in Berlin amid the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has called for 'patience' in the coronavirus crisis, saying that society will have to 'live with the virus' until a vaccine becomes available. — AFP

67, who believes a strong immune system is enough to combat the disease. Holland, of the Children's Health Defense, said: "Some react fine to vaccines, others are paralyzed or killed." However, a 2015 paper by CDC epidemiologists said "multiple studies and scientific reviews have found no association between vaccination and deaths except in rare cases."

'Hungry for a vaccine'

The VCP is running an 18-month study tracking conversation online about the coronavirus and conducting global polls to measure attitudes towards social distancing, isolation, hand-washing and anticipating a vaccine.

From analyzing more than 3 million posts a day between January and mid-March 2020, director Dr Heidi Larson said the vast majority were eager for a

treatment, fast. "People are hungry for a vaccine," she said. In Italy, which has been hit badly by COVID-19, the anti-vax movement has "virtually disappeared" in the discussion on the coronavirus, according to virologist Dr Roberto Burioni.

For a coronavirus vaccine to be effective, wide uptake and annual vaccination is likely to be required, said George Kassianos, immunization lead at the Royal College of General Practitioners in London. There is also the question of how to distribute fast enough to people lining up for the vaccine. "Essential workers will be the priority. Police officers, hospital workers, cleaners. Then at-risk groups," said Douglas L Hatch, a physician specialized in pandemic preparedness working on the COVID-19 response in San Francisco. "By the time you get to the anti-vaxxers, they'll have trouble getting it even if they wanted to." — Reuters



SYDNEY: People wearing face masks walk in the Burwood suburb of Sydney amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

Australia, New Zealand flatten coronavirus curve

SYDNEY: Australia and New Zealand yesterday brushed aside calls for an easing of tough restrictions on travel and public gatherings despite their success in curbing the spread of COVID-19. The number of new coronavirus cases in the neighboring nations has fallen dramatically in the last two weeks, raising hopes that difficult social distancing measures may be relaxed.

But Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the country was still "many weeks away" from lifting any restrictions. "Patience has got to be our virtue here," he said, noting that countries like Singapore and South Korea had initial success against COVID-19 but saw a surge in new cases after travel and other restrictions were eased.

Australia registered just 63 new infections on Sunday and Monday, bringing the total number of cases to 6,366 for a population of 25 million. It was the low-

est two-day increase in a month. New Zealand, a nation of five million, saw just eight new cases yesterday for a total of 1,072, its lowest daily increase in more than three weeks. "We've been relatively successful - I don't want to squander that success or the sacrifices New Zealanders have made," New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern responded yesterday when asked when the lockdown will be eased.

"Our goal has to be go early and go hard, so that we get into a position where we can ease up restrictions with confidence," she said, adding that no action would be taken for at least another week. Both countries have closed their borders to foreigners and imposed 14-day quarantines on returning residents. New Zealand has enforced a strict stay-at-home lockdown while Australia imposed tight restrictions on movement, gatherings and public activities.—AFP

Fearful of COVID-19 return, Beijing turns into virtual fortress

BEIJING: Beijing has virtually walled itself off to outsiders with drastic measures to protect China's seat of power against the threat of a second wave of coronavirus infections from other regions. After largely getting the outbreak under control, China has banned foreigners from entering the country as authorities fret over an increase in cases imported from abroad - though most have been Chinese citizens.

But Beijing has gone a step further, imposing a strict 14-day quarantine on people arriving from other parts of China, regardless of whether they test negative for COVID-19 - a measure not required in other cities. Beijing, of course, is not like any other Chinese city. The ruling Communist Party postponed its once-a-year congress, known as the "two sessions", in March and experts said it likely wants to make sure the thousands of delegates who participate are not at risk before a new date is set.

"Strengthening management of people returning to Beijing has become the most critical priority, otherwise it is impossible to create the right conditions for the two sessions to start," said Ma Liang, a professor at Renmin University's School of Public Administration and Policy. The measures are ultimately meant to shield the Communist Party elite from the virus, said Alfred Wu, associate professor at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy. "In this moment, the central government and core leadership are highly protected, so ordinary people will have to pay the price," he said. Beijing has imposed a mandatory 14-day quarantine on all returning students, who must test negative to attend school. All hotel guests must test negative within seven days prior to their stay. The measures have already deterred some from going back.—AFP

North Korea fires multiple suspected cruise missiles

SEOUL: North Korea yesterday fired several suspected cruise missiles towards the sea, the South's military said. The "multiple projectiles" fired from Munchon in the east of the country were believed to be "short-range cruise missiles," the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement. The test comes a day before the nuclear-armed North marks the 108th anniversary of the birth of its founder Kim Il Sung, grandfather of the current leader Kim Jong Un.

It also comes a day before the South holds parliamentary elections, and at a time when the world's attention has been largely focused on the coronavirus pandemic, which Pyongyang insists it has so far escaped. The North has repeatedly tested ballistic missiles in recent years, which climb high above the Earth, often into space, before being brought down towards their targets at high speed by the force of gravity.

Its arsenal includes ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) that are capable of reaching the whole

of the US mainland. In contrast cruise missiles travel at low altitudes—sometimes just a few meters (feet) above the surface, making them hard to detect—and are powered throughout their flight. Sometimes highly manoeuvrable, they need sophisticated guidance systems to bring them to their targets.

Yesterday's missiles travelled over the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea, before coming down in the water, the JCS said. "South Korea and US intelligence authorities are closely analyzing related issues," they added. The North is subject to multiple UN Security Council sanctions over its banned weapons programs. It has carried out a series of weapons tests in recent months, often describing them as multiple launch rocket systems while others have called them ballistic missiles.

Pyongyang has fired cruise missiles in the past. In June 2017 it hailed the successful test of a what it called a new type of surface-to-ship cruise missile designed to hit "any enemy group of battle-

ships" that threatened North Korea. That launch hit targets in the Sea of Japan, it said, and took place the week after two US aircraft carriers, the USS Carl Vinson and USS Ronald Reagan, took part in naval manoeuvres in the area. Those missiles flew some 200 kilometers, which analysts said was an improvement on a 2015 test that flew only 100 kilometers.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump traded mutual insults and threats of war during 2017, sending tensions soaring. The South's President Moon Jae-in used the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in his country to broker a rapid diplomatic rapprochement and a series of summits followed. But talks between Pyongyang and Washington have been largely deadlocked since their Hanoi summit broke up in February last year amid disagreement on sanctions relief and what the North would be willing to give up in return.—AFP



SEOUL: A man watches a television news broadcast showing file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul yesterday. — AFP

Gantz, Netanyahu given 48 hours to form a unity govt

JERUSALEM: Israel's parliament speaker Benny Gantz was given 48 hours yesterday to reach a deal on an emergency unity government with his former election rival, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The narrow negotiating window was approved by President Reuven Rivlin minutes after Gantz's four-week mandate to form a government expired. In a joint statement, Gantz's centrist Blue and White alliance and Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party said "significant progress" had been made towards a deal in direct talks between the two men yesterday morning.

But claims of progress in coalition talks have been made repeatedly since Israel's inconclusive March 2 election, while a deal has remained elusive. As Israel's unprecedented political deadlock has persisted, there have been widespread calls for an interim, national unity government to combat COVID-19, which has infected more than 11,500 Israelis. Gantz, an ex-military chief, has squared off against Netanyahu in three votes over the past year. Neither man earned enough support in any of the votes to forge a stable governing coalition.

Following the most recent polls, a majority of lawmakers in Israel's 120-person parliament, or Knesset, recommended Gantz try to form a government. But his chances of forging a stable coalition were always remote, given the deep divisions within the anti-Netanyahu camp. In a surprise move last month, Gantz was elected Knesset speaker and effectively stopped seeking to form a coalition that he would lead as prime minister.

Moment of truth

Instead, he called for an alliance that would be led by Netanyahu for a defined period, allowing Israeli politics to have a rare moment of unity as it stares down an unprecedented health crisis. Gantz and Netanyahu have discussed various arrangements, including deals that would see Gantz take over as prime minister after several months. "Israelis are expecting us to put aside our differences and work together," Gantz said late Monday, calling this a "moment of truth." "History will not forgive us if we fail."

In a statement yesterday, Rivlin said he had agreed to extend Gantz's mandate until the end of today following a request that came "with the support" of Netanyahu. Gantz and Netanyahu conveyed that "they are very close to reaching an agreement," the statement further said.

Top former Gantz allies have broken with the speaker since his decision last month to seek a deal with Netanyahu, arguing that the prime minister cannot be trusted to honor the terms of an accord.

In office since 2009, Netanyahu is Israel's longest-serving premier and the first to be indicted while in office. The premier denies charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, filed against him in January. Netanyahu critics have charged that he will stop at nothing to make the indictments disappear, including pushing for a fourth vote in the hope of finally gaining a parliamentary majority that could push through legislation granting him immunity from prosecution.—AFP

Business

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10 Ooredoo provides its services to Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies**10** China's trade slump eases in March**11** KFH holds AGM, approves distribution of 20% cash dividends, 10% bonus shares

FARMINGDALE, NY: Prices for a gallon of gas drop below \$2.00 at a Gulf service station in Farmingdale, New York. Oil prices rose yesterday after US President Donald Trump said producers are considering cutting 20 million barrels per day - more than double the figure publicly announced - to help the virus-hit sector. —AFP

Oil prices rise as Trump flags deeper cuts

Saudi Arabia expects further cuts when OPEC meets in June

SINGAPORE/WASHINGTON: Oil prices rose yesterday after US President Donald Trump said producers are considering cutting 20 million barrels per day - more than double the figure publicly announced - to help the virus-hit sector. US benchmark West Texas Intermediate rose nearly 2 percent to trade at \$22.85, while international benchmark Brent crude climbed 1.5 percent to trade at \$32.26.

OPEC producers dominated by Saudi Arabia and allies led by Russia thrashed out a compromise deal on Sunday to cut production by nearly 10 million barrels per day from May. The agreement was aimed at boosting prices after months of heavy falls, with the COVID-19 outbreak sapping demand as countries around the world have put their populations under lockdown.

Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman suggested on Monday further cuts could come when OPEC meets in June. "Flexibility and pragmatism will enable us to continue do more if we have to," he told Bloomberg. "We have to watch what's happening with demand destruction or demand improvement, depending on how things evolve."

A Saudi-Russian price war compounded the crisis, with both countries ramping up production as they bid to hold on to market share and undercut US shale producers. Prices fluctuated after the output cut was announced, however, with traders still nervous about a supply glut amid estimates that demand has plunged 25 million barrels per day.

US deficit to soar to record \$3.8tn in 2020: Watchdog

WASHINGTON: A steep economic downturn and massive coronavirus rescue spending will nearly quadruple the fiscal 2020 US budget deficit to a record \$3.8 trillion, a staggering 18.7 percent of US economic output, a Washington-based watchdog group said on Monday.

Releasing new budget estimates based on spending mandated by law, the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget (CRFB) also projected that the fiscal 2021 deficit would reach \$2.1 trillion in

2021, and average \$1.3 trillion through 2025 as the economy recovers from damage caused by coronavirus-related shutdowns. The estimates follow the US Treasury's report on Friday of a \$744 billion budget deficit in the six months through March 30, which included minimal impact from the outbreak of the new coronavirus. Officials said significant budget impacts from spending and reduced revenues would appear in April's budget results. The CRFB, a coalition of former US lawmakers, government officials and economists that has advocated for reducing deficits, said US public debt by the Sept. 30 fiscal year-end would exceed 100 percent of US GDP, from just under 80 percent prior to the coronavirus crisis. "These projections almost certainly underestimate deficits, since they assume no further legislation is enacted to address the crisis and that policymakers stick to current law when it comes to other tax and



Trump says 20m bpd output cuts from May

Trump said Monday that the cuts may be deeper than the headline figure - with top producers considering slashing output by 20 million barrels a day under the deal. "People are saying 10 million but we think the number they will actually hit is going to be closer to 20 million barrels a day," Trump said at a press briefing about the coronavirus, referring to how much oil production would be cut.

And he said such a deal could protect millions of US jobs. "This historic action will help nearly 11 million American workers who are supported by the US oil and gas industry."

Trump had already tweeted about the deal earlier in the day. "Thank you to all of those who worked with me on getting this very big business back on track, in particular Russia and Saudi Arabia," he wrote. Mexico balked at an agreement on Friday, leading Trump to step in and say the US would help Mexico meet its end of the bargain.

After a Sunday videoconference, the top producers

agreed to slash daily production by 9.7 million barrels from May, according to Mexican Energy Minister Rocio Nahle, down from the 10 million barrels a day envisioned earlier. The agreement between the Vienna-based Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and non-OPEC producers foresees deep output cuts in May and June followed by a gradual rise in production until April 2022.

But with demand down by about 25 million barrels per day and North American producers shutting down their rigs because they don't have space to store their crude, Dan Pickering, chief investment officer at Pickering Energy Partners, told AFP the deal's benefits are likely to be seen only later in the year.

"The reality is things are bad. They are going to stay bad for a couple of months," he said.

Not enough?

Trump cheered the agreement Monday, saying, "It's a very monumental agreement." With countries putting their populations under lockdown, the coronavirus pandemic has caused an economic decline and a global demand slump that has sent oil prices to two-decade lows.

Meanwhile, Russia and Saudi Arabia ramped up output in a price war to hold on to market share and undercut US shale producers. Calling Trump's goal "aspiration," analyst Andy Lipow said the market reaction to the OPEC+ deal has been "muted," as uncertainty remains over the degree to which producers will comply with the cuts.

spending policies," the group said in a statement. CRFB's projections also assume the economy experiences a strong recovery in 2021 and fully returns to its pre-crisis trajectory by 2025. If that recovery is achieved, public debt would reach 107 percent of GDP that year, exceeding levels at the end of World War Two. A slower recovery could cause debt to reach 117 percent of GDP by 2025, the group said.

The record for a fiscal year deficit was \$1.41 billion, set in 2009. Deficits exceeding \$1 trillion followed for three subsequent years before subsiding as the economy recovered. But the deficit reached \$984 billion in 2019 and the Congressional Budget Office had projected a \$1.07 trillion deficit for 2020.

The CRFB started with that pre-crisis CBO estimate and added about \$2.2 trillion in spending while subtracting \$570 billion in revenue due to reduced economic activity. — Reuters

"Lots of questions... remain, as far as compliance and ultimately how much oil is actually taken off the market," he said. "Any increase in prices over the next few months is going to encourage producers to keep on producing." Storage tanks have also rapidly filled up, and Lipow said markets are watching major economies like China and India to see whether they will make more purchases for their national reserves to free up capacity. Trump announced last month the US would buy "large quantities of crude oil" for storage in the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. Producers have resigned themselves to tough times, with Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak saying he did not expect oil markets to recover before "end of the year, in the best case," according to Russian news agency TASS. — AFP

Bursa Kuwait defers listing of its shares

KUWAIT: Bursa Kuwait yesterday announced that the listing of its shares in the Kuwait market will be postponed from the preliminary date, set to be April, 19, 2020, due to the current outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic, and the consequent halt on all official governmental operations, as per the instructions of the Cabinet of Ministers, in an effort to mitigate the spread of the virus.

Bursa Kuwait will announce the new listing date in due time based on the date identified by the Capital Markets Authority, and in accordance with the procedures and provisions stipulated in Law No. 7 of 2010 regarding the establishment of the Capital Markets Authority and the regulation of the securities activity and its executive bylaws and respective amendments. Bursa Kuwait will continue to share regular updates, in line with its transparent approach to ensure stakeholders are kept up to date with the latest developments.

Business

Ooredoo provides its services to Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies

Company affirms full support to government in fight against COVID-19

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, affirmed its support to the Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies, by providing them with the company's services, during a meeting held last week at the headquarters of the Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies. This is considered to be the most important sector during this crisis and because of its vital role with food safety and security in Kuwait. The meeting was attended by Ooredoo Kuwait, represented by the Chief Business Officer at Ooredoo Kuwait, Abdulaziz Al-Babtain, Senior Director of Corporate Communications, Mijbil Al-Ayoub, and Head of Government Relations and Public Entities Thamer Al-Tahous, and the Chairman of The Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies, Meshal Al-Sayyar.

Commenting on details of the meeting and the services provided by Ooredoo, Chief Business Officer at Ooredoo Kuwait, Abdulaziz Al-Babtain stressed

Ooredoo Kuwait's commitment and full support of the government during these times. Al-Babtain recognized the great efforts made by the union during this critical time. Al-Babtain added that Ooredoo's management has been keen since day one to harness all the company's capabilities to serve all the concerned sectors in Kuwait, where we had the honor to meet the Chairman of the Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies and his team, and we ensured our full support and commitment".

Volunteers to get 1500 free SIM cards



Al-Babtain praised the efforts of the volunteer teams that the Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies depended on in organizing all the work in the various cooperative societies in Kuwait during the crisis. We made sure to provide 1500 free SIM cards to these volunteers and all workers in the cooperative sector."

Senior Director of Corporate Communications, Mijbil Al-Ayoub also confirmed that this initiative is in alignment with the Company's Corporate Social



KUWAIT: Chief Business Officer at Ooredoo Kuwait, Abdulaziz Al-Babtain, Senior Director of Corporate Communications, Mijbil Al-Ayoub, and Head of Government Relations and Public Entities Thamer Al-Tahous, and the Chairman of The Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies, Meshal Al-Sayyar and other officials at the headquarters of the Kuwait Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies.

Responsibility strategy to support the society at all times throughout the year, and across all sectors. This has been Ooredoo Kuwait's strategy since day one,

and the company is committed to provide the society and the nation with all the support needed under any circumstances.

China's trade slump eases in March

BEIJING: The plunge in China's exports and imports eased in March as factories resumed production, but shipments are set to shrink sharply over coming months as the coronavirus crisis shuts down many economies and puts the brakes on a near-term recovery.

Financial markets breathed a sigh of relief after customs data yesterday showed overseas shipments fell 6.6 percent in March year-on-year, improving from a 17.2 percent slide in January-February, as exporters rushed to clear a backlog of orders after forced production shutdowns.

Economists had forecast shipments to drop 14 percent from a year earlier. Yet, while the trade figures were not bad as feared, analysts say the export and overall growth outlook for the world's second-biggest economy remains grim as the pandemic has brought business activity across the globe to a standstill.

"The above-expectation March trade figures do not mean that the future is carefree," said Zhang Yi, Beijing-based chief economist at Zhonghai Shengrong Capital Management. Zhang said he expects first-quarter gross domestic product data on Friday will likely show a contraction of 8 percent - the first quarterly slump since at least 1992. Analysts' forecasts for China's first quarter GDP ranged widely between a contraction of 2 percent and 16 percent. "A decline in exports throughout the second quarter has been the market consensus now and a drop of 20 percent or more is a high-probability event. For policymakers, more policies should be rolled out to address the possible societal issues stemming from mass-scale unemployment," Zhang said.

Russia's small businesses reeling under curbs

MOSCOW: When President Vladimir Putin announced a paid holiday for the month of April to keep Russians home and prevent the coronavirus from spreading, many small business owners braced themselves. How would they keep to the president's promise of paying employees while they were shut down?

The small furniture manufacturing company where Natalia Garnova works has told her she will receive only half her monthly salary of 40,000 rubles (\$544). "I do not know how I will feed my children tomorrow!" the 41-year-old told AFP. "This month, we have no orders... We already know that several people will be laid off."

Lawmakers are due Tuesday to table legislation to help small and medium-sized businesses, but for many it could already be too late. According to the Center for Strategic Research, a think tank close to the government, about a third of companies it surveyed forced employees to take leave without pay from the first week of the non-working period. Nearly half of the thousand companies surveyed reduced wages, 16 percent announced redundancies and nine percent anticipated bankruptcy this year.

The non-working period was initially introduced by Putin on March 28 and extended on April 2 to the end of the month as part of tightening measures to slow



SHENYANG: A customer (right) buys fruits at a market in Shenyang in China's northeastern Liaoning province. — AFP

The data showed imports slid 0.9 percent from a year earlier, also above market expectations of a 9.5 percent drop, which the customs attributed to improving domestic demand. They had fallen 4 percent in the first two months of the year. The better imports picture partly reflected shipments that were stuck in ports being cleared and catch-up demand as authorities eased restrictions. Yet, domestic consumption was far from robust with key imports such as iron ore dipping in March, underlining the broad economic strains. "Imports should hold up better given that domestic demand looks set to stage a further recovery in the coming months," said Julian Evans-Pritchard, senior China economist at Capital Economics.

"But the quarter of China's imports that feed into China's export sector will continue to fall and hold back the recovery in imports." The overall trade surplus last month stood at \$19.9 billion, compared with an expected \$18.55 billion surplus in the poll and a deficit of \$7.096 billion in January-February.

Stock markets in Asia extended their gains after China's trade report, while risk sensitive currencies including the Australian and New Zealand dollars as well as the

pound pulled ahead, mainly on relief on the less gloomy data.

Jobs, income pressured

China, where the novel coronavirus first emerged late last year, has reported 82,249 infections and 3,341 deaths as of April 13. Worldwide, infections have surpassed 1.8 million with over 119,000 deaths. The pandemic's sweeping impact on businesses and consumers has triggered an unprecedented burst of stimulus from policymakers in the past two months, with the World Trade Organization forecasting that goods trade would shrink more steeply this year than during the global financial crisis.

Beijing is trying to restart its economic engines after weeks of near paralysis to contain the pandemic that had severely restricted business activity, flow of goods and the daily life of people. But as the virus rapidly spread to almost all of China's trading partners, severely restraining overseas demand particularly in European and US markets, Chinese factories' export orders have been scrapped. Many privately-owned exporters have been forced to fire workers and warned about factory closures in not too distant future. — Reuters



MOSCOW: People buy vegetables at a street market on the outskirts of Moscow. When President Vladimir Putin announced a paid holiday over April to keep Russians home and prevent the coronavirus from spreading, many small business owners braced. How would they keep the president's promise of paying employees while shutting? — AFP

COVID-19. Russia on Monday reported 2,558 new infections-its biggest daily increase to date-bringing its total tally to 18,328 cases and 148 deaths. The fallout could see the number of unemployed rise from 2.5 to 8 million this year, according to Russia's Audit Chamber.

Difficult to survive

Some self-employed Russians, like 29-year-old personal trainer Olga Novikova, have already seen their incomes vanish. "The longer it lasts, the more difficult it becomes to survive," she told AFP.

She cannot give lessons in gyms since they were closed earlier this month. Coaching online is not an attractive option, Novikova says, because of competition from any number of free alternatives.

For Russians whose purchasing power has already been hit over recent years, the economic situation looks set to become even more precarious. The outlook is especially bleak for the nearly two-thirds of Russians who-according to a survey last year by the Levada polling agency-have no savings.

In an effort to support entrepreneurs, the government has rolled out tax cuts and offered deferred payments. The central bank has released funds for banks so they can offer cheap loans to small businesses. But Igor Nikolayev, director of the Institute for Strategic Analysis of FBK Grant Thornton Russia, said the "government measures should be on a bigger scale and better targeted. "There should be direct support for the citizens, those who suffer most from the situation," he added. — AFP

HSBC announces COVID-19 charity projects

KUWAIT: HSBC will immediately begin making contributions to a range of projects in Kuwait, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE to help an estimated 80,000 underprivileged individuals and families impacted by COVID-19. The disbursements, organized in close cooperation with HSBC's partner charities around the region, will also help hospital workers in the frontline fight against the virus.

Sabrin Rahman, HSBC's Head of Sustainability in the Middle East, North Africa and Turkey (MENAT) said: "Our efforts in MENAT as part of the Group's \$25 million COVID-19 charitable fund will be vitally important to our local communities. We have acted quickly to the urgent call for support by putting our resources to work where they have the biggest impact and donating to specific projects so that we are able to ensure accountability and track the real impact our funding has had on people's lives.

"We carefully selected local charity partners that have track records of being able to identify and help vulnerable communities by getting them food, medicine and education resources," Rahman added.

In Kuwait, \$45,000 has been allocated to support families in need and to provide food supplies and hygiene kits to blue collar workers. Up to 3,600 people will be reached. Roger Winfield, CEO of HSBC Kuwait, said: "We will continue to support our communities in these challenging times and trust that the donations will not only provide immediate relief but will also make a difference in the future."

HSBC's disbursements in MENAT will account for \$1.2 million of the \$25 million global fund and underpin the bank's existing long-term community programs. HSBC MENAT's student-focused future skills program will pivot to be delivered remotely, using e-learning channels, while our entrepreneur-targeted programs, such as the Social Impact Accelerator (C3) and the TiE Mentorship Program, will also adopt virtual and online sessions. This regional news follows HSBC Group's recent announcement of a \$25m COVID-19 charitable fund to support the international medical response, protect vulnerable people and ensure food security. \$5m has already been earmarked and donated to relief efforts in mainland China, Hong Kong, UK and India, as well as supporting international/global appeals for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent and the World Health Organization (WHO), powered by the United Nations Foundation and Swiss Philanthropy Foundation.

CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced the most recent issues of CBK bonds and related Tawarruq at a total value of KD 240 million for 3 months with a rate of return at 1.250 percent.

Telco shares are surprise losers

SINGAPORE/BERLIN: As lockdowns worldwide drive a surge in internet use, boosting online sales for businesses as varied as gaming and food delivery, the stocks of internet providers are an unlikely laggard on global markets. In Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, a combination of high fixed costs, debt and market disruption has left telcos significantly underperforming the data-hungry businesses their networks carry.

"It's a bit of a surprise," said Kasper Elmgreen, equities head at Europe's biggest fund manager, Amundi Asset Management. "The traditional defensive sectors have played defensive, but telcos have not really been defensive," he said, pointing to price drops more or less in line with European markets. Globally, a 13 percent drop in the MSCI world telecommunications services index pales in comparison to healthcare, down 6 percent, technology, down 8 percent, or consumer staples, down 10 percent.

The poor showing illustrates the difficult dynamics facing carriers, even

when their services are more essential than ever. Around the world, millions of people are confined to their homes and businesses closed as governments restrict movement to halt the spread of the coronavirus which has led to over 113,000 deaths.

That has driven business and entertainment online, but left telcos spending to service surging demand, and, with fixed pricing structures, no quick way to monetize the investment.

At the same time, roaming revenue has dried up as people travel less, and telcos are bracing for a slump in new contracts accompanying a wave of unemployment as businesses shut.

"Because of flat-rate deals, we hardly get any extra revenue if people spend more time surfing or talking on the phone," Ralph Dommermuth, chief executive of German telco I&T Drillisch AG, told Reuters. "I can't yet say whether more time being spent in the home office will compensate for revenue losses that will arise because many companies or private individuals have to put off renewing their contracts or can't pay their bills."

The outlook has driven stock drops as investors fret about dividends that have been under pressure for years. Companies such as AT&T Inc, which is down 21 percent this year, Telefonica SA, down 30 percent, and MTN Group Ltd have either matched or outstripped benchmark declines. — Reuters

Business

KFH holds AGM, approves distribution of 20% cash dividends, 10% bonus shares

Bank adopts financial technologies and embraces digital economy to open new horizons

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) held its annual general Assembly meeting (AGM) and approved the Board of Directors' recommendation of distributing 20 percent cash dividends and 10 percent bonus shares to shareholders.

Chairman of Kuwait Finance House (KFH) Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq said: On behalf of myself, my colleagues, and members of the Board of Directors of Kuwait Finance House "KFH", I would like to present to you KFH Group Annual Report for the year 2019.



Leading position in secondary sukuk market

The world economy witnessed several developments in 2019, following the sharp decline witnessed during the last three quarters of 2018. Global growth has lost its momentum, recording the lowest growth ratio since the global financial crises. This is mainly attributed to USA- China trade tensions, feared Brexit impacts, weakening global industrial production indicators and the lackluster growth in China. These factors have created a state of uncertainty which has impacted investment decisions, contributed to the deterioration of the world growth, instability of global conditions, increase in economic slowdown and geopolitical tensions in the Middle East.



Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq

Amid this financial and economic uncertainty, KFH has endeavored to encounter new challenges and deals efficiently and diligently with the economic fluctuations in the regions and countries in which it operates. KFH has adopted conservative policies to enhance its reserves and contribute to the effective management of increasing risks, strengthen its leading position in various markets, explore new promising horizons, develop KFH

capabilities to overcome all challenges and avail all opportunities to ensure viability and achieve sustainable growth.

Several years ago, KFH has designed a framework to access several markets and studied several acquisition opportunities. We have intensified our endeavor to adopt financial technologies, digital economy and information security to open new horizons. We continue to enhance our management capabilities and accommodate and develop our human resources.

KFH has witnessed, during the last 5 years, a major transformation in activities, efficiency and reputation as well as a highly remarkable and sustainable financial performance. We were able to translate KFH vision into reality and reap the harvest of the board approved long term strategy, which aimed to diversify sources of profit, mitigate risks, optimize costs and increase operating income from banking activities. Also, we have managed to execute several successful exits from non-strategic investments and achieve harmony and alignment among group subsidiaries to ensure sustainable growth and profitability. These results were evidenced through positive indicators, adequacy of financial position and well-balanced sustainable growth.

Positive results

The year 2019 witnessed remarkable achievements, where KFH Group accomplished positive results and significant returns for shareholders. KFH group has maintained a distinguished position for its operations regionally and internationally, thus increasing shareholders' profit to KD 251 million i.e. an increase of 10.4 percent compared to last year. We have also achieved tangible progress regarding the rate of return on shareholders' equity.

Group financial indicators continued their escalating trajectory through enhancement of profit and increase in capital adequacy ratio to 17.67 percent i.e. higher than regulatory ratio of 15 percent. We have observed Basel standards and fixed liquidity ratios, which enable us to face market challenges, fluctuations and future regulatory requirements. In a historical step, we received the consent of the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Central Bank of Bahrain to proceed with KFH acquisition of Al-Ahli United Bank - Bahrain, subject to the fulfillment of certain conditions and the completion of the due diligence process of the acquisition project. Should the acquisition be achieved, by the Grace of Allah, KFH would be taking the leading position locally and regionally, with assets approximating \$101 billion, thus becoming the largest Islamic bank worldwide. In addition, KFH shall achieve positive advantages from this acquisition as it shall be a significant driver for growth and prosperity in the future of KFH Group. The acquisition shall introduce KFH to several new markets e.g. United Kingdom and Egypt, and create a regional market for the bank comprising more than 430 million people with average annual income approximating \$42,000 per capita according to the purchasing power parity concept. The acquisition shall enable the bank to optimize costs in the markets where it operates and shall enhance allocation of its resources.

Strategic planning

The Group strategic planning is not limited to the near future only, as we endeavor to redesign our products and services using various tools to adapt with advanced technological developments. This approach shall contribute to the amendment of traditional methods in banking business. We have upgraded IT infrastructure and maintained the security and stability of the operating environment and expanded the banking solutions circle using modern technology.



KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) holds its annual general Assembly meeting.

Our focus, in 2019, was on direct digital transformation to achieve the best customer experience, thus providing brand new digital services side by side with our 12 electronic branches in addition to ATMs and POS spread worldwide. Digital transformation shall fulfill customers' needs. Customer classification programs would be developed in a new innovative manner and technology would be the key to success and outstanding customer service and not only a cost optimization tool.

Major steps were considered to adopt Fintech and Blockchain technologies as fast as possible to take advantage of modern technologies. E-Payment methods were activated by making transfers through Ripple technology alongside Swift services, using SWIFT - GPI System.

We have applied major initiatives on the internal operations front, applying artificial intelligence solutions and applications. Robotics were activated to perform highly complicated functions, thus minimizing FX buy/sell transaction time and enabling better management of liquidity and daily operations at better prices, higher productivity and efficiency without any human interference, using FX platform "KFH-Global". This platform shall fulfill retail and corporate customers' FX needs, decrease transaction processing time and pricing and enable our employees to focus on enhancing the sales front.

KFH Group has taken certain initiatives comprising financial technology and e-banking channels. KFH digital channels indicators have increased to record 142 million transactions during the year. Mobile bank transactions increased by 4.9 percent for the same period while KFH Online transactions, ATM and SMS service, made an exceptional increase of 13.7 percent compared to 2018.

KFH continues to finance mega projects and transactions through its Corporate Banking sector and expand its trade relations with core corporate clients in all sectors in a highly competitive environment. Locally, KFH has played the role of Mandated Lead Arranger to a finance transaction for the benefit of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, which amounted to KD 350 million. On both regional and international fronts, Kuwait-Turk has participated in the financing of Marmara Highway Project in Turkey, amounting to KD 60 million, as part of a syndicated finance provided by several banks and financial institutions.

Sukuk market

KFH enjoys a leading position as a market maker in the secondary sukuk market. Also, it participated in several initial sukuk offerings issued by GCC governments and other creditworthy financial institutions. KFH participated in qualitative offerings of green sukuk, thus reflecting global tendency towards sustainable growth and maintained its leading position for the fifth year respectively as a main dealer in the primary market for the issuance of the International Liquidity Management Corporation Sukuks among 11 main international and regional dealers.

On the asset management front, we have managed, after 5 years of intensive efforts, to enhance returns on investments, through KFH Capital, restructure our investments, improve asset quality, offer several investment funds e.g. KASB Financial Technology Fund and RIET Fund which has been listed in the Boursa Kuwait for the first time. These achievements have improved capital adequacy ratios and coped with our strategy to focus on core banking business and develop basic Islamic banking business.

KFH Trade launched a new application comprising further advanced advantages which would help users to make trading decisions. Globally, KFH Group continued to play its leading role as a trustworthy arranger of sukuk for governments and corporates. KFH is currently ranked 6th globally, on the Bloomberg Global Sukuk Issuers Index. KFH Capital has led arrangement of sovereign sukuk transactions, in 2019, for countries, banks and corporates. Also, it has participated in the issuance of a \$2 billion sukuk for the Turkish government and \$1 billion sukuk for the government of Sharjah.

On the regional level, KFH Capital has played the role of the main arranger for a first time Sukuk issuance transaction, for the Saudi Telecommunication Company, amounting \$1.3 billion. Also, it has led and arranged Sukuk transactions for First Abu-Dhabi Bank, Kuwait International Bank and Sharjah Islamic Bank. The company has also agreed on a major financial advisory mandate transaction worth SR 6 Billion for a major real estate project in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

While we are committed to achieve remarkable returns for our shareholders on the long run, the Board of Directors would like to recommend to the General Assembly the distribution of cash dividends of 20 percent and bonus shares of 10 percent in light of the distributed returns on investment deposits and saving accounts.

Awards, recognitions

We received, during the year, more than 10 distinguished banking awards including Best Islamic Financial Institution Worldwide prize 2019, Best Islamic Financial Institution prize in the Middle East, Safest Islamic Financial Institution prize in GCC 2019 by Global Finance and Best Bank prize in Kuwait 2019 by Euromoney.

KFH share stands as one of the main components on FTSE Index for emerging markets in Boursa Kuwait since its inception last year. Also, it maintained its leading position in the premier market since its inception in Boursa Kuwait. The credit rating affirmed by global rating agencies in 2019 reflects KFH's leading position among Islamic Banks worldwide as evidenced in the ratings.

In 2019, we have focused intensively on developing our Human Resources. As a Group, KFH has continued to exceed Human Resources strategic initiative targets for 2019 and Nationalization remains a core focus in all our areas. In Kuwait specifically, we have reached a high Kuwaitization ratio, well above the mandated level and we employ the largest number of Kuwaiti employees in Financial Services in the country.

Our Talent Acquisition team remains focused on attracting and retaining young National Talents and for 2019, over 98 percent of our new joiners are Kuwaitis. Moreover, we have successfully launched two Forsah programs this year, the most recent one focusing specifi-

cally on IT graduates to be able to build additional capacity in the IT and Digital space for KFH.

KFH's exceptional relationships with our employees continues to grow and enhance as indicated by our 2019 Employee Engagement results. Over the past three years our results have grown from 73 percent to 81 percent, which is a good indicator of the success our staff are experiencing specifically in their individual and team performance and professional development.

This year, KFH Kuwait Human Resources lead the path for employee wellness, helping employees align their personal and work wellness goals which also had a significant impact on engagement and organizational health.

Group CEO Mazin Saad Al-Nahedh's message

Positive performance reflects excellence of KFH's strategy

KUWAIT: Several economic developments have occurred on the local and international levels. However, the financial results have exhibited a positive financial and administrative performance, thus reflecting the excellence of KFH strategy and policy. KFH achieved outstanding performance, maintained a strong financial position, established higher value for shareholders, enhanced its position and continued to achieve growing returns on the long run.

Competition forms a daily challenge for KFH. However, KFH employees' efficiency and ability to adapt with all market trends, adopt sound decisions and provide all required services and solutions to customers have given KFH the ability to develop business systems and avail all opportunities resulting from challenges encountered. KFH continued to improve its services, products and investment in the field of innovation and sustainability as evidenced in the developed customer service and enhancement of future growth.



Mazin Saad Al-Nahedh

KFH achieved major accomplishments in 2019, thus continuing its strategy and progress to be the first choice always. KFH strategy considers four pivots to achieve this goal. The first pivot comprises customer-centric service, thus adopting customer's service as a priority to make his experience with KFH valuable and enjoyable. The second pivot comprises innovation, development of digital services and products,

implementation of high-tech solutions to fulfill customers' aspirations and needs, and improve the efficiency and capacity of customer service through digital channels. The third pivot covers focus on productivity to enhance performance levels, magnify available resources and use new resources. The fourth pivot covers the establishment of a highly efficient management culture based on the best professional practices.

Growth continued, during the last 5 years, according to the monetary and regulatory policies implemented by the Central Bank of Kuwait to achieve stability and growth in the government sector. This growth has coped with the economic transformation trajectory and the growth vision for the year 2035. The vision comprised an ambitious economic road map focusing on highly significant sectors, namely the financial sector. KFH strength emanates basically from the solid customer base and customers trust and confidence. KFH proceeded with steady steps to reserve this fortune, enhance standards and practices and achieve the highest standards of banking services.

The financial results for the year 2019 reflected the bank's continued success and progress towards growth and development. We have achieved a growth in net profit, attributable to the shareholders, by 10.4 percent with net profit approximating KD 251 million for the year 2019. Effective management of resources, cost optimization and growth increase in various business sectors have contributed to these results. Financing portfolio increased by 1.6 percent totaling KD 9.3 billion. Assets reached KD 19.4 Billion while customers' deposits increased by 15 percent, reaching KD 13.6 billion. Growth resulted into an increase in financing income by 8.1 percent reaching a total of KD 931.6 million in addition to an increase in Net operating profit by 12.5 percent, a total of KD 510.1 million.

Integrated banking services

KFH provides integrated retail and corporate banking services to finance all activities; commercial, industrial, real estate and infrastructure projects, locally and globally. KFH branch network covers 62 branches in Kuwait, 430 branches in Turkey, 9 branches in Bahrain, 14 branches in Malaysia and 5 branches in Germany. Through KFH Capital, KFH provides diversified package of services including investment banking assets, brokerage in money markets and a vast set of investment fund services. The bank conducts its activities through an integrated management system and opera-

tional units performing their core services efficiently and effectively.

Digital retail banking services

Retail banking sector made several distinguished initiatives and accomplishments to achieve KFH goals, alleviate productivity and ensure customers satisfaction. KFH owns an extensive network of ATM systems comprising more than 1250 machines spread all over Kuwait. KFH focused on increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of this network and increasing the mechanism and dynamic functions of the systems. Services include card-less cash deposit, thus introducing more modern and attractive systems. The systems comprise newly designed screens and modern functions, enabling the customer to open an account via ATM, cheque printing and opening gold buy/sell accounts. KFH achieved a leading position concerning POS growth portfolio in the market, marking an increase by 1182 machines i.e. 24 percent of market growth.

Seeking to improve customer experience, loyalty, confidence and competitive advantages to include a larger segment of products and services, we have developed and launched a new customer experience program to determine customer satisfaction levels on daily basis. Customers' feedbacks are collected on daily basis through a set of questionnaires. All results are dispatched to all main banking channels for further development through branches, call center, phone applications, e-banking services and ATMs. More than 40 indicators impacting customers' experience are being monitored (e.g. waiting time - speed ...etc.), bearing in mind that new standards are being adopted monthly. Development and improvement procedures are carried out in cooperation with all concerned departments. Customer's feedback is construed as an extremely rich source of information which we receive with utmost clarity. On the other hand, "I Care" program has been revamped, to focus on cultural transformation program (Barrett Values Center), thus implementing an integrated retail banking program covering employees' awareness, workshops and case study.

In line with its expansion strategy, branch wise, KFH inaugurated the opening of the automobile showroom in Shuwaikh in May 2019. The showroom is considered as the largest modern automobile showroom in the Middle East, covering a total area of 38 thousand square meters, while the exhibition hall covers an area of 17 thousand square meters accommodating more than 200 cars for more than 20 agents and 30 trademarks including cars, motorcycles and boats.

Digital options and payments future

KFH proved its capability, adaptation, flexibility and leadership in banking services through its excellence and innovation in information technology. The ambitious strategy and diversified plans were the cornerstones in these achievements during the last two decades. Developments in communication and marketing tools were achieved as a result of technological development and innovation. IT has become the backbone of KFH business.

KFH digital strategy has become a cornerstone in the transformation plan which KFH started 5 years ago. The strategy comprised 3 stages: the first stage consumed 2-3 years, focusing on building the base for a digital future through several elements. The first element aimed to change prevailing internal culture by prioritizing customer satisfaction in all service channels, customer service centers and direct sale. The second is to simplify internal procedures and make them more flexible and effective. The third element is to consider modern technology in all fields and cope with the prevailing marketing trend. The second stage focused on launching digital services to suit the requirements of the millennium generation. The third stage comprised the development of an integrated electronic platform with multiple means. KFH Group succeeded in fulfilling customers' needs through digital and electronic banking services. Digital transactions increased to reach more than 372 million transactions in 2019 i.e. an increase by 24 percent compared to 2018. This increase comes on the back of the remarkable performance and customers' significant interest in KFH website. The number of transactions in 2019 reached 27 million i.e. 3x the number 9 million in 2018.

Native Americans battle climate change

TAHOLAH, Washington: For several years, Fawn Sharp has seen her tribe on the coastline of Washington state lurch from crisis to crisis: rising sea levels have flooded the Quinault Indian Nation's main village, and its staple sockeye salmon in nearby rivers have all but disappeared - a direct hit to the tribe's finances and culture.

Now Sharp, the 49-year-old president of the Quinault, plans to move the tribe to higher ground, restore the fishery, and diversify its economy. The projects are foundational, she says, because of a lack of federal money to help Native Americans adapt to climate change. The Quinault's struggles reflect the broader challenges of Native Americans, who are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change because their tribes are tied to reservation land and rely on natural resources for subsistence and trade, according to the National Climate Assessment report written by federal agencies. Southwestern tribes such as the Navajo Nation face acute water shortages as the Colorado River dries up. Northern tribes including the Bar River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa are losing access to wild rice and walleye due to warming in Lake Superior, which has heated faster than any other US body of water.

Tribes are ill-equipped to adapt their reservations to increasing threats from storms, flooding, drought and wildfires because their communities are typically poor and because federal programs offer scant support. The Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs provides \$10 million a year for tribal climate resilience planning nationwide, and FEMA provides another \$20 million to tribes under a fund to protect communities from natural disasters.

That's not much when spread among more than 500 tribes, said Sharp, who has made climate change the top issue in her newly acquired additional role as president of the National Congress of American Indians, which represents 535 registered tribes.

In addition to lobbying for more federal support, Sharp has set her sights on industries that contribute to climate damage. To finance a relocation of some



TAHOLAH, Washington: Rising sea levels have flooded the Quinault Indian Nation's main village and its staple sockeye salmon in nearby rivers have all but disappeared - a direct hit to the tribe's finances and culture. — Reuters

tribe members, she plans to propose a carbon tax for companies doing business on the reservation, which features rich timberlands and a port. The measure would make it the first tribe in the United States to price carbon. She's also considering a lawsuit against big oil companies she believes should help pay the tab for climate-damage mitigation.

"Those who are directly responsible for causing the damage should be paying," she said, for "generations of exploitation."

The Western States Petroleum Association industry group declined to comment on potential lawsuits, saying only that oil companies and tribes

should be "working with each other and not against each other."

Vanishing salmon

On a February morning at the Quinault Indian Nation's fish processing plant in Taholah, manager Shane Underwood grew frustrated by yet another small catch. A lone fisherman had arrived with five steelhead salmon after hours on the river. "We used to process 40,000 to 50,000 pounds of fish a day. Now we're lucky to see 1,000," Underwood said as she hosed down the catch.

After the steelhead season comes the sockeye

blueback run, a salmon fishery unique to the Quinault reservation that has all but disappeared. For a third straight April, the Quinault have closed the river to blueback fishing after its fisheries department forecast a fifth consecutive record-low run. The salmon is an icon of Quinault culture, heavily featured on totem poles and in artwork on tribal buildings, and a traditional meal at family gatherings and in tribal rituals. Now it's also a symbol of climate damage. The summer runoff from Anderson glacier in the Olympic mountains northeast of the reservation once cooled the Quinault river system. The last of the glacier melted nine years ago, warming the river and distressing the salmon, said Justine James, a cultural historian who specializes in timber, fish and wildlife for the Quinault Environmental Protection Department.

The Quinault's Business Committee created a Salmon Habitat Restoration Program, buffering streams, repairing culverts and roads near the river, and clearing fish runs. The tribe is also embarking on a \$1.2 million project to restore the floodplain on the Upper Quinault River in hopes of creating better spawning habitats.

"We have been eating the salmon for thousands of years," James said. "It's our spirit, our heart." Before the collapse, the tribal seafood enterprise Quinault Pride, along with fisheries management, sustained about 350 direct and indirect jobs and generated about \$29 million in revenue, according to a 2015 report by economic consulting firm Resource Dimensions, making it the second largest source of revenue for the Quinault after its resort and casino.

For fisherman Kokomo "Koke" Snell and others, the decline in the salmon fishery has upended a cherished career and a family tradition. Unable to fish blueback, Snell will pay the bills working a temporary job in village beautification - clearing the riverbanks of debris and sprucing up the homes of tribal elders.

"It doesn't feel right," Snell said. — Reuters

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- Fellow of the European Board of Otolaryngology - Head & Neck surgery.
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Lifestyle | Features



A cyclist rides past a graffiti painted on a road to raise awareness about the COVID-19 coronavirus during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Chennai.—AFP

Mia Farrow's daughter is 'growing stronger' amid coronavirus battle

Mia Farrow's daughter Quincy is "growing stronger" amid her coronavirus battle. The 75-year-old actress revealed last week her daughter Quincy, 26, had been admitted to hospital after contracting the potentially fatal virus, which is also known as COVID-19. And on Monday, Mia issued an update on Quincy's health, where she confirmed her daughter is getting better with each day that passes. She tweeted: "Every day my daughter grows stronger. Thank you again with all my heart for your good wishes and your prayers." The 'Great Gatsby' star had previously asked for people to share their thoughts and prayers with her daughter, after revealing she was in hospital battling the illness, which causes breathing difficulties in some patients. Mia wrote on social media at the time: "A personal request. If you would be so kind, would you please send up a prayer for my daughter Quincy. Today she had no alternative but to go to the hospital for help in her struggle against the coronavirus." The actress adopted Quincy - who has a daughter of her own named Coretta with her husband Ethan - in 1994 when she was just one year old. Meanwhile, Mia is no stranger to publicly worrying about her children, as she previously said she was "petrified" her son Ronan would be killed over his work exposing Harvey Weinstein's alleged sexual misconduct. The journalist penned a series of articles for The New Yorker in 2017, detailing the disgraced movie mogul's series of unwanted sexual advances towards actresses, as well as a recent book 'Catch and Kill' - which detailed his quest to uncover the truth - and his famous mother was convinced someone would be following him in order to silence him for good. Asked if she knew Ronan was investigating alleged abuse in the movie industry, she replied: "Yes, and I was petrified - for his life. I had this anxiety that something would happen to him. My worry was him travelling back from The New Yorker to his apartment each night - he's always been nocturnal, so he'd be coming back at 2 or 3am, and I was just so afraid that if he took the subway somebody would be following him and push him on the track. I begged him not to take the subway. I said, 'Take an Uber.' I said, 'Make sure the driver watches until you are indoors.' He promised me he would and he did. I found him hotels nearby, but he said, 'Mom, I just want to go home, play my guitar and relax.' He writes songs. He's a really good singer."

One Direction members re-follow Zayn Malik on Twitter

All four members of One Direction have re-followed former member Zayn Malik on Twitter. Harry Styles, Louis Tomlinson, Liam Payne, and Niall Horan have sparked rumors they could be set to reunite as a band alongside Zayn - who left the group in 2015, just months before the others went on indefinite hiatus - as they have all followed the 'Pillowtalk' hitmaker on social media. The reunion speculation has been further

fuelled by the fact the 'History' hitmakers have also re-followed the official One Direction account. If the group is set to reunite, the timing couldn't be better, as this July will mark the 10th anniversary since they were put together on UK singing competition 'The X Factor' in 2010, where they eventually finished in third place. The news comes after Liam, 26, recently sparked speculation of a reunion himself, when he confirmed the band have been "speaking together" ahead of their

10th anniversary. He said: "We've got a 10-year anniversary coming up, so we've all been speaking together a lot over the last few weeks, which has been really nice." Meanwhile, Niall's decision to follow Zayn may come as a shock to some fans, as he recently said he isn't "friends" with the 27-year-old singer. He explained: "As long as I've known him, Zayn's been the hardest man to stay in touch with. Then we had a falling out a few years ago and, to be honest, that's just the dynamic: you have people you are friends with and people you are not." The 'No Judgement' singer, also 26, later clarified his comments, insisting there's "no bad blood" between them, but still insisted they aren't in a place where they can "reconvene". He said: "He's quite a hard fella to keep in touch with. He'd probably tell you that himself, to be fair. I don't particularly talk to him a lot. I mean, if he's got something coming out or something I will text him. He might not reply but I'll give him a shout, but I don't know ... After the band, he left for his reasons and then he never really spoke to us much afterwards. I've got no bad blood with him at all but some things have a lifespan. I don't know. We will see what happens. Maybe one day we can reconvene at some point, but not right now."



Gomez felt pressured to 'open up' on her private life

Selena Gomez felt pressured into "opening up" about her private life because "people were taking away [her] narrative". The 27-year-old singer has been vocal about her battle with her mental health, as well as hardships she has faced in her love life, but has now said she felt forced into speaking about her private life because of people online who were making her "sound really bad" by telling her story for her. Speaking to Interview magazine's April 2020 issue - where she was interviewed by Amy Schumer - she said: "My intention was never to become a tabloid ... it got out of control. And then I was like, 'Wait, none of this is true.' The way [people have] ... tried to explain things has made it sound really bad, when in reality there's nothing wrong with the fact that I needed to go away or that I fell in love. I had to start opening up because people were taking away my narrative and it was killing me. I'm so young and I'm going to keep changing, and no one has the right to tell me how my life's going." And whilst she may have felt pressure to speak out, the 'Lose You to Love Me' hitmaker is ultimately happy she has the platform to do so, because she "believes in seeking help". When asked what keeps her afloat amid her public scrutiny, she added: "What has kept me afloat is that I know eventually it'll be someone else - and I don't mean that in a negative way. Sometimes it's been bad for my career, but other times it's like, 'Now I can talk about things like my depression and anxiety, things that I've struggled with and which I'm totally open about, because I believe in seeking help.' But other than that, what keeps me grounded is that I do my best to avoid it. It's not like I don't live my life."



Hemsworth gives up vegan diet after suffering from kidney stones

Liam Hemsworth was forced to quit his vegan diet after suffering with kidney stones. The 30-year-old actor followed a plant-based diet for almost four years until February 2019, when he was forced to switch up his eating habits after enduring "one of the most painful weeks" of his life during a battle with kidney stones. Recalling his health battle, he said: "I was vegan for almost four years, and then February of last year I was feeling lethargic. Then I got a kidney stone. It was one of the most painful weeks of my life. I was doing press for 'Isn't It Romantic'. But I had to go to the hospital and get surgery. It's all good now, thankfully. But once you get one kidney stone, you have a 50 percent chance of getting another one if you continue eating the way you were eating." Liam's particular kidney stone was caused by the high amount of oxalate - a natural substance found in vegetables - in his diet, and so he had



to "completely rethink" what he eating in order to get his health back on track. He added: "Well, my particular kidney stone was a calciumoxalate kidney stone. It forms from having too much oxalate in your diet. Oxalates are really high in a lot of vegetables, specifically spinach, almonds, beetroot, potatoes. Every morning, I was having five handfuls of spinach and then almond milk, almond butter, and also some vegan protein in a smoothie. And that was what I considered super healthy. So I had to completely rethink what I was putting in my body." The 'Hunger Games' star says "health" is what inspired him to try a vegan diet in the first place, and whilst he "felt great" to begin with, he has since "reassessed" his diet to make a meal plan that works for his body. Speaking to Men's Health magazine, he said: "Health for sure. I go from one extreme to the other. My mum always makes fun of me. She's like, 'If you could just find a happy medium in between all these things you do, then you'd probably be better off.' "It was right before I started shooting 'Independence Day: Resurgence'.



Lipa says 'good fortune' aided her career

Dua Lipa thinks good fortune has played a key role in her career success. The 24-year-old singer moved to London from Kosovo during her childhood, and she acknowledges that the switch has proven to be a life-changing decision. Speaking to NME magazine, Dua - who is now one of the world's best-selling musicians - shared: "I'm so fortunate - well, fortunate and unfortunate, I suppose - that my parents moved to London from Kosovo and allowed me to be here and pursue a career I could only dream of. I feel like a lot more kids need to have that same opportunity." The chart-topping pop star previously admitted that very few of her musical inspirations visited Kosovo when she was a child. The 'One Kiss' hitmaker explained: "For me, it was like ... I wish, when I was living in Kosovo that I had the opportunity to see some of my favorite artists like Pink and Nelly Furtado ... no one really came to Kosovo." However, in a bid to change that, Dua has created the Sunny Hill Festival, which attracts artists from all over the world to Kosovo. And she was thrilled that Miley Cyrus was one of the star attractions at the inaugural festival. Dua said: "We had Miley Cyrus, who was the first international female artist to come and perform in Kosovo and for me, it was like, the biggest dream come true." Like, just seeing how happy and how excited people were to see her onstage and she absolutely killed it. "She killed it. She was amazing and her energy was amazing. She's one of the most talented people - she just smashed it. And I think, I was so close crying. I was so happy and so proud. It was such an amazing moment."



Reinhart says her dog's recovery is a 'miracle'

Lili Reinhart says her dog's recovery from a vicious attack is a "miracle". The 23-year-old actress recently revealed that Milo was the victim of an horrific attack by another dog - but she's confirmed her pet is now on the road to recovery, having undergone surgery. The 'Riverdale' star said on Instagram Story: "Milo's resting. He's taking it easy. He has some doggie CBD that helps him kind of stay more chilled out right now. He's doing really well and getting lots of love." After posting the video, Lili shared a series of photographs and also revealed her sense of relief. She wrote: "I'm not sure what made that other dog release its grip on my little baby, but it's a miracle. And I am so thankful that he is okay and safe at home with me. I thought I was going to lose him. His little head was in the jaws of a dog 10x his size. I was screaming his name at the top of my lungs and sobbing - I felt so helpless. (sic) Lili previously described the incident as the "most terrifying" thing she's ever witnessed. She also thanked her followers for being so supportive of her and Milo. The actress continued: "I keep having flashbacks on that entire situation and how traumatizing it was for him and me. I mean I just ... I hope that he heals really well and he's not terrified of other dogs from now on - we're probably gonna have to work on that. "But truly thank you to everyone who reached out about his well being. He's doing surprisingly well and being a little extra cuddly right now - which is very sweet - but I am watching his every move and taking good care of him."—Bang Showbiz





An art installation featuring a video screen, part of the "Balconies, Life, Art, Pandemic, and Proximity" exhibition, is seen in Berlin amid a new coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic.—AFP photos



An art installation featuring a photograph of a balcony in Athens and a quote by Rosa Luxemburg.



A poem with the title "Lockdown" hangs on a clothes line, part of the "Balconies, Life, Art, Pandemic, and Proximity" exhibition.



An art installation, part of the "Balconies, Life, Art, Pandemic, and Proximity" exhibition.

'BALCONIES, LIFE, ART': BERLIN'S SHUT-IN ARTISTS SHOW THEIR WORK

Berlin's art galleries are closed, but the art scene is rising to the occasion as around 50 artists join a community exhibition from their balconies. "While our freedom of mobility is on hold, (balconies) become unique sites of everyday performance," organizers said as they launched the project in the trendy Prenzlauer Berg district of east Berlin. Balconies are "emergency exits to take a breath of fresh air, catch a moment of sunshine or a smoke", said Oyvul Durmusoglu and Joanna Warsza, whose project "Balconies, Life, Art, Pandemic and Proximity" gives artists a 48-hour showcase for their work. The rules of

isolation in the face of the coronavirus pandemic are less strict in Berlin than elsewhere in Germany, allowing people a chance to admire the works while out for a stroll.

One installation presents ribbons of toilet paper cascading down a building's facade, a reference to Germans' rush to stock up on the must-have commodity as soon as the coronavirus pandemic arrived in Europe. One artist displayed black and white photographs of people on their balconies in Athens and Cordoba, while another hung a ladder made from rope and sticks. "With zero budget, no opening, and no

crowds, the project proposes an intimate stroll (within current regulations) to search for signs of life, art and points of kinship and connection", the organizers said.

"When some of us are cut off from our plans and our loved ones, we reach out to the balconies of the world, against isolation and individualization, not leaving everything in the hands of the virus and the fear it generates," they added. The 48 hours end on Monday evening, when the artists will retract their works and return to their usual solitary endeavors.—AFP



Berlin-based Polish artist Isabella Sedeka stands on her balcony as she displays her work, part of the "Balconies, Life, Art, Pandemic, and Proximity" exhibition.



An art installation featuring a swing hanging from a balcony.



An art installation, part of the "Balconies, Life, Art, Pandemic, and Proximity" exhibition.



An art installation alluding to the work of Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara, featuring a sign reading: "12.4.2020 I got up at 7:45 am".



An art installation featuring fabric tied together to make a rope, part of the "Balconies, Life, Art, Pandemic, and Proximity" exhibition.



An art installation by German artist Knut Eckstein, part of the "Balconies, Life, Art, Pandemic, and Proximity" exhibition.

So much time to read and Italy's bookstores closed

Plenty of time to read and no bookstores open — such is the situation in Italy under coronavirus lockdown that is making independent booksellers see red. The already struggling sector now questions why they've been asked to close while deliveries of books from online giant Amazon.com are allowed to continue on the streets. "Online bookshops are open with their delivery men on the move and employees doing the packing," said Paolo Ambrosini, a bookseller in Verona and president of the Italian Booksellers Association. "If books are deemed unnecessary, then let them be blocked everywhere," he said, complaining of inequality in the system.

A bookseller in Florence, Umberto Panerai, called the closure until April 3 — and perhaps longer — of all the country's bookshops "disastrous" and questioned the logic of the decrees that force him to close his shop while other sellers are exempt. "Newspaper kiosks or supermarkets can sell books, while perfume shops remain open," he said. The March 10 government decree that put all of Italy on lockdown due to the spread of the coronavirus shut most non-food shops deemed non-essential, yet exceptions include pharmacies, electronics stores, pet food supply stores and newspaper kiosks. Italian publisher Mondadori said the closure of its 600 or so bookshops had been "partly offset" by the strong growth of online sales which had risen by more than

50 percent. Amazon declined to provide sales figures.

Zero profit

Marie-Eve Venturino, who took over a historic French bookshop in the heart of Rome three years ago, said financial viability of independent bookshops "is very fragile, almost at zero profitability". "In France, the economic model is aided and subsidized. Not in Italy. A business stoppage of more than a month could be fatal for us," she said, adding that "the big winner will still be Amazon, which will be able to deliver toilet paper, pasta and books." A first round of government aid to people and businesses did not include any help to the shuttered sector.

In Belluno, to the north of Venice, a mayor on Monday allowed the five booksellers in the municipality of 27,000 people to deliver to people's homes. Thanks to the mayor's dispensation, Alessandro Tarantola now locks himself in his bookshop, closed to the public, to take calls and deliver books immediately, wearing a mask and gloves. "Reading is a fundamental thing, it opens the heart, the mind, allows us to lose ourselves in a world other than the one in which we live now," Tarantola said. Customers had been asking for recently released novels, or books for children suggested by their teachers, he said. Among the books most requested? The 1947 classic novel from Albert Camus — "The Plague." —AFP

Hunger for 'good news' grows as pandemic woes deepen

Battered by grim headlines, horrifying statistics and deep uncertainty over the coronavirus pandemic, many people worldwide are trying to lift their spirits by seeking out "good news." Sites specializing in upbeat news have seen a surge in growth in recent weeks. And Google searches for "good news" have jumped fivefold since the start of the year. The Good News Network, created in the late 1990s, has seen traffic triple in the past month with more than 10 million visitors, according to founder and editor Geri Weis-Corbley.

"People are sending us links of positive, inspiring things happening in their neighborhoods, in their cities, in their states, so we have so much good news to pass along," said Weis-Corbley, who also observed spikes in interest after the September 11 attacks and the global financial crisis of a decade ago. "We think that people now are experiencing a yearning for good news that will continue." Other websites including The Guardian, Fox News, HuffPost, MSN and Yahoo have their own pages dedicated to uplifting stories. A CNN newsletter, "The Good Stuff," created last year, has seen a 50

percent jump in subscriptions over the past month, a network spokesperson said. "Our editorial team saw growing interest in the stories that made our audience smile, with fascinating discoveries, everyday heroes, inspiring movements and great things happening all over the world," the spokesperson said.

Actor John Krasinski joined the effort with his own weekly YouTube video show, "Some Good News," from March 29, which mimics a traditional news broadcast, but focusing on uplifting stories. Krasinski's videos offer a mix of tributes to pandemic "health heroes" and celebrity appearances including from his actress wife Emily Blunt, and got 15 million views for its first episode.

Coping with crisis

Stuart Soroka, a professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, said humans are conditioned to pay closer attention to negative news because it could force them to change their behavior. But in a crisis, Soroka, said people also look for news which is "most outlying, at odds with our expectations," which may

account for the public turning to positive stories. Ashley Muddiman, a professor at the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Kansas, said the positive news is a way of helping people cope. "There's a good amount of research that suggests that when people are too scared or things are too negative, that they might try to shut down instead of trying to do things or go about their life," Muddiman said.

"I do think that people want to see solutions and want to see people working towards solutions rather than bickering with each other. When news can cover that, I think that that is something to be attractive to audiences." Some people are showing signs of fatigue with the onslaught of depressing news about the health crisis. "I think that a lot of us can fall victim to being drawn into constant negative news," said Clarence Edwards, a resident of the US capital city Washington. "I think the media pay attention to what sells, and mainly that's scary and bad news." —AFP

Turkey sees opportunity in virus crisis to boost influence



NAYRAB, Syria: Turkish army troops, wearing protective masks against the coronavirus, take position behind sand barricades on the M4 highway, which links the northern Syrian provinces of Aleppo and Latakia. — AFP

Libya unity govt seizes strategic...

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But shortly afterwards, dozens of rockets rained down on Tripoli, with the GNA blaming Haftar's forces. The rockets mostly hit the outskirts of Mitiga International Airport in the east of the capital and the nearby Soug al-Jomaa residential neighbourhood, civil defense spokesman Oussama Ali said. Haftar's forces have repeatedly accused the GNA of using the airport for military purposes. GNA accused Haftar's forces of taking revenge against Tripoli's civilian population following their losses on Monday. "The criminal militia and mercenaries have taken out their anger on residential neighbourhoods of Tripoli to avenge their defeat, firing dozens of rockets and missiles on the capital indiscriminately," spokesman Mohamad Gnonou said.

The two sides had agreed to a January ceasefire brokered by GNA backer Turkey and Haftar supporter Russia, but it has been repeatedly violated. The seizure of Sorman and Sabratha was the GNA's most significant victory since June last year, when its forces retook the town of Gharyan, the main supply base for Haftar's forces southwest of the capital.

US eyes virus 'plateau'; world...

Continued from Page 1

he claimed to have saved "tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of lives". The US death toll has hit 23,200 - by far the worst-affected country - but the president said: "It looks like we're plateauing, and maybe even in many cases coming down."

He has repeatedly stressed he wants to open the world's largest economy as swiftly as possible and is expected to announce a plan this week on how to jump-start stalled business. The US president appeared to be supported by the latest figures from Johns Hopkins University showing 1,509 deaths in the country over the past 24 hours - almost identical to the previous day.

In New York, where the virus has killed more than 10,000 people and seen unclaimed victims buried in unmarked mass graves, Governor Andrew Cuomo said the nightmare might be coming to an end. "The worst is over if we continue to be smart going forward. I believe we can now start on the path to normalcy," Cuomo told reporters, as Trump said only the president had "the ultimate authority" to reopen businesses. The economic impact in the US and elsewhere could be seen as officials in the southern city of Houston wrapped food in plastic bags and threw them into cars. "We went to the stores and they are closed. Yes, we had problems to buy food," said sales assistant Catalina Mendoza Cabrera.

In France, one of Europe's worst-hit countries, Macron said in a televised address the epidemic there was "beginning to steady... (and) hope is returning". However, he said a strict lockdown in force since March 17 would continue until May 11 - after which schools and businesses could gradually

Another virus death in Kuwait...

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The amnesty drive, offering free air tickets and no fines, began April 1 with Filipinos, who have already departed. But the Egyptian and Bangladeshi governments have not so far given the green light for the return of their nationals.

The civil aviation authority issued new directives regulating the return of foreign workers to their countries, with one of the guidelines banning the travel of anyone who tests positive for the coronavirus.

Jalal Harchaoui, a Libya analyst at The Hague-based Clingendael Institute, said Monday's setback meant Haftar had lost the entire coast west of Tripoli. According to Harchaoui, GNA forces have in recent weeks been more "aggressive... on multiple fronts, often successfully". "High-precision artillery on the ground, Turkish drones and better coordination" were proving a "formidable" combination against Haftar's Emirati-backed forces, he said.

GNA chief Fayez Al-Sarraj confirmed the capture of Sabratha and Sorman on Monday, and said loyalist forces had also repelled an attack by Haftar's troops the previous day on Abu Grein, 250 km southeast of Tripoli. Several UN-backed attempts to reach a ceasefire have failed, and the UN has slammed repeated violations of a 2011 weapons embargo. Last month, the UN's Libya envoy Ghassan Salame quit his post citing health reasons.

On March 17, the world body and nine countries called on Libya's warring parties to cease hostilities to allow health authorities to fight against the new coronavirus. The GNA and Haftar's forces welcomed calls for a humanitarian pause, but the GNA said it reserved "the right to respond to daily assaults targeting civilians and public facilities". On Saturday the UN's humanitarian coordinator for the country said armed groups had cut off water supplies to more than two million residents of Tripoli and its surroundings, denouncing an "abhorrent" act of collective punishment. — Agencies

reopen at a "progressive" rate. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari told his citizens they must "endure a little longer" as he also extended a lockdown in key cities saying: "We must not lose the gains achieved thus far."

And in Britain, whose Prime Minister Boris Johnson is recovering after three days in intensive care with the virus, officials warned the peak was still to come and the lockdown there was likely to endure. In countries seen as further along in the epidemic, life was very gradually beginning the long process of returning to normal, with officials handing out masks to commuters returning to work in Spain. "It's wonderful because it's so necessary and it helps those of us who have to use public transport," said office worker Jose Antonio Cruces.

Italy will reopen some bookshops and laundries on a trial basis Tuesday, as the number of critically ill patients dropped for the 10th straight day despite the death toll topping 20,000. Cuomo stressed that rebooting New York's economy was a "delicate balance", likening it to "opening a valve". "It's not going to be, we flip the switch, and everybody comes out of their house, gets in their car, waves and hugs each other, and the economy will start."

And World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned control measures "must be lifted slowly," noting that coronavirus was 10 times deadlier than the 2009-10 swine flu outbreak. Australia and New Zealand appeared to be heeding the warning, steeling their citizens for longer restrictions, despite some success in flattening the virus curve.

"We've been relatively successful - I don't want to squander that success or the sacrifices New Zealanders have made," said New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern when asked when the lockdown would be eased. But there were cautionary tales that the virus is not easily defeated. In China, where the outbreak first reared its head and the government says it has largely curbed the spread of the virus, officials announced scores of new imported infections. — AFP

In the meantime, MPs strongly criticized Finance Minister Mohammad Al-Sheetan, calling on him to resign, as the National Assembly financial and economic affairs committee began yesterday discussing a government-sponsored draft on public debt allowing the government to borrow up to KD 20 billion over the next 10 years. MP Riyadh Al-Adasani said as the government has not withdrawn its draft law on public debt, the finance minister should either resign or face a grilling in the Assembly. He reiterated that Kuwait is not in need to borrow funds as there are many alternatives and plenty of cash available with various government departments. MP Safa Al-Hashem also criticized the minister, saying he is unable to run the ministry and should resign.

ISTANBUL: Turkey is pushing its credentials as a major humanitarian power in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic by sending medical equipment to Italy and Spain, detection kits for Palestinians and even medicines to Armenia. Turkey is hard hit itself by the virus outbreak which has killed nearly 1,300 people but it is still finding the resources to help other countries in need.

In recent weeks, Turkey has supplied masks, hazmat suits and hydroalcoholic gel to Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, all among the worst hit in Europe. Turkey's humanitarian aid reflex is not new, Jana Jabbour, a Turkish diplomacy expert at Sciences Po university in Paris, pointed out. "President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has always wanted to position Turkey as a 'humanitarian power'," quick to rescue those in need, whether they are oppressed Muslim minorities or countries hit by natural disasters, Jabbour told AFP. But unlike Ankara's usual interventions, Turkey is now also supporting developed countries - which are more used to helping than being helped.

Turn the tables

It is also an opportunity to turn the tables for Erdogan, who professes nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire, infamously described as "the sick man of Europe" by Western powers before its collapse at the end of World War I. "It is a question of showing that Turkey is a strong power which has the means to offer aid to European states, now themselves 'sick', both in the literal and figurative senses," Jabbour said.

To cultivate this idea, each delivery to Europe is carefully staged, from the plane's take-off broadcast live on television to the beneficiaries' warm thanks spread across the newspapers. Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin was quick to point out that "Turkey is the first country in NATO to send help to Spain and Italy", who are also members of the US-led military alliance.

Ties with the West and Europe in particular have been strained for several years. The latest spat with the European Union came earlier this year when Erdogan said migrants, fleeing conflict in Syria and across the Middle East, would not be prevented from leaving Turkey for Europe, causing huge numbers to gather on the Turkish-Greek border. Erdogan insists repeatedly that Europe has not done enough to support EU membership candidate Turkey, which hosts around 3.6 million Syrian refugees.

Relations deteriorated badly as the migrant crisis grew in 2015 and got worse still in 2016 when the EU criticized Erdogan's crackdown after a failed coup. Erdogan in turn lambasted Brussels for failing to show solidarity with a fellow democratically-elected leader. "Turkey's candidacy for the European Union is good for Turkey, but it's also good for Europe. In fact, this pandemic has proved us right," Kalin said. According to Kalin, nearly 100

countries have asked for help from Turkey while Erdogan said on Monday supplies had reached 34 states.

'Strategic angle'

Beyond the PR operation, "there is a strategic angle in terms of the countries that Turkey has picked to send pandemic-related assistance," said Soner Cagaptay, of the Washington Institute of Near East Policy. When the government last week sent equipment to five Balkan countries, a region once under Ottoman rule, Turkey sought to reinforce its image as a "generous uncle," he told AFP.

Another example is Ankara's decision to send medical equipment to Libya where a civil war between the Turkey-backed government in Tripoli and dissident forces supported by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt have wreaked havoc with the health system. "Turkey is making sure that the Tripoli government doesn't collapse under the burden of the pandemic. It's part of the wider clash between Turkey and the UAE-Egypt axis," Cagaptay added.

The crisis created by COVID-19 has also offered Turkey an opportunity to extend an olive branch to countries with which it has had frosty relations for many years. Kalin on Sunday said Erdogan had thus approved the sale of drugs to Armenia. Despite tensions between the two countries, Turkey agreed to sell medical supplies to Israel, Kalin said, adding that material would also be sent to the Palestinians, for free.

Meanwhile, the Turkish parliament yesterday approved a law that allows for the release tens of thousands of prisoners as a safety measure against the coronavirus outbreak. "The draft has become law after being accepted," the official Twitter account for the parliament's general assembly said.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International have criticized the law because detainees charged under controversial anti-terrorism laws are not included. The rights groups also have condemned the exclusion of other inmates including journalists, politicians and lawyers in pre-trial detention. This includes people jailed while awaiting a date for their trial to begin, those waiting for a formal indictment or suspects currently being tried.

Among them are businessman and philanthropist Osman Kavala and Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas. Turkey launched a crackdown after a failed coup in 2016 and Demirtas is one of tens of thousands behind bars because of alleged links to outlawed Kurdish militants, or the movement led by US-based Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen. The government accuses Gulen of ordering the attempted putsch but he strongly denies the allegation.

The law affects several types of prisoners, including pregnant women and older people with medical conditions. But it excludes murderers, sexual offenders and narcotics criminals. — AFP

India extends world-biggest...

Continued from Page 1

And with some of the most crowded cities on the planet, there are fears that numbers could take off and overwhelm the shaky healthcare system. Several states including Maharashtra - home to Mumbai and with the highest number of cases - Tamil Nadu and Odisha have already announced lockdown extensions.

The World Health Organization yesterday praised India's decision to extend the lockdown, saying "it would go a long way in arresting the virus spread". "Despite huge and multiple challenges, India has been displaying unwavering commitment in its fight against the pandemic," WHO regional director Poonam Khetrapal Singh said in a statement.

The shutdown, with strict limits on activity, has been devastating for the economy - and in particular for India's poor. Millions of daily wage laborers suddenly lost their jobs, forcing hundreds of thousands to travel hundreds of kilometres back to their home villages, often on foot. Some died on the way, while others were shunned by locals when they made it back. One clip that went viral on social media showed a group of migrants being hosed

down with chemicals by local officials.

Others have been stranded in cities in cramped, unsanitary conditions where the virus could spread quickly. New Delhi alone is providing hundreds of thousands of free meals. Farmers have complained of a lack of workers to harvest crops while snarl-ups of thousands of trucks not allowed to move because of the lockdown have hampered food transport.

"We have tried to keep the interests of the poor and the daily wage workers in mind while making these new guidelines," Modi said in his 24-minute address. "The central and state governments are working together to ensure that the farmers don't face any problems."

Reserve Bank of India governor Shaktikanta Das has called the coronavirus an "invisible assassin" that could wreak havoc on the economy. A restaurant industry group, a sector that employs millions of people nationwide, warned Monday there could be "social unrest" if it did not receive financial relief. The commerce ministry has also reportedly urged the government to consider opening more activities "with reasonable safeguards" even if the lockdown is extended.

Even before the pandemic, the Indian economy was stuttering, with the highest unemployment for decades. Growth had slowed to about 5.0 percent before the pandemic and some analysts say it could slump to 1.5-2.0 percent this year - way below the level needed to provide jobs for the millions coming into the labor market each month. — AFP

Sanders endorses ex-rival Biden...

Continued from Page 1

Sanders struck a unifying tone on Monday, telling viewers "it's imperative that all of us work together."

The 78-year-old independent leftist senator from Vermont exited the 2020 race last week after losing almost all of the primary contests following a strong start, leaving Biden as the party's presumptive nominee. The deadly coronavirus pandemic has forced a suspension of all in-person political campaigning, as most of the nation remains under stay-at-home orders - including Biden and Sanders, who appeared online from their homes. Sanders on Monday signaled it was crucial to unite around Biden's campaign to defeat Trump, whom Sanders branded "the most dangerous president in the modern history of this country."

Biden said he was "deeply grateful" for the endorsement - one of many that have come from former campaign rivals including Senator Kamala Harris, Senator Amy Klobuchar and former congressman Beto O'Rourke. "You've been the most powerful voice for a fair and more just America," he

told Sanders. "You've put the interests of this nation and the need to beat Donald Trump above all else," Biden added. "As you say, 'not me, us.'"

Biden, who at 77 is mounting his third presidential run, also appealed to Sanders supporters. "I see you, I hear you, I understand the urgency of what it is that we have to get done in this country, and I hope you'll join us," Biden said. "I'm going to need you badly." Biden announced the two men were establishing several policy working groups to address issues like climate change, health care, economic justice and college affordability.

Sanders has been more liberal on such issues than Biden, and has successfully brought them front and center in the campaign, especially his call for a government-managed universal healthcare system. Trump's re-election campaign said in a statement that Biden has "had to adopt most of Bernie's agenda" - policies that Trump has branded socialist. "President Trump's supporters will run through a brick wall to vote for him. Nobody is running through a brick wall for Joe Biden," Trump 2020 campaign manager Brad Parscale said in a statement.

Trump's approval rating has ticked up in the last few weeks of the pandemic, even as the US death toll soared past 20,000, a global high. But in a series of polls conducted this month, Biden leads Trump in head-to-head general election matchups by an average of 5.9 percent, according to the RealClearPolitics website. — AFP

Stars

Daily SuDoku								
5			9	3	2			
			6		7	8		
9						5		6
	1		6					4
			9		8			
2			4		7			
1	8							7
		3	5		4			
		5	8	7				2

very hard

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

hard

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

OK, up and at 'em, Aries! You might feel like you're walking through sand today, but you really need to shake your booty and get the blood flowing. If you don't get up and do something, you'll be a slug all day. You need to clear your head and cast off that bloated feeling. Most importantly, you want to get a good start to the day so you can accomplish everything that awaits you.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

You'll want to respond to your creative juices, which will be flowing freely today, Libra. Don't suppress the urge to sing, compose, paint, or write. You'll be in the full flower of creativity, so make the most of it. You'll be able to take care of your daily obligations and still make room for your creative expression. Listen to the messages you receive in your heart and let them burst forth.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

You could be started to find that your artistic talents, although dormant for a while, are called into service today. A particular undertaking of those around you could benefit from your gift in this area. Don't panic, Taurus, you won't be expected to do this alone. Others will pitch in and help. One thing to be careful of today is not let your emotions run away with you. It could spoil everything.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

Tugs on the home front could be pulling you away from attending an event with friends that you've been looking forward to for some time. Try to be reasonable and sort out the needs of those at home with kindness in your heart. You might be able to address those issues and still have time to be with your friends later. Just remember to keep your priorities straight, Scorpio.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

This could be a tough day for you emotionally. It might surprise you to find that some very old, deep-seated feelings get churned up in the course of investigating a subject of keen interest to you. It might be difficult to process these feelings. Don't try to intellectualize them too much, Gemini. At the same time, be wary of situations that could trigger an emotional cyclone. Some words can be brutally painful.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Cool heads will be needed today, Sagittarius, as tempers may flare at work because of frustration with ongoing problems. You might need to take the lead in keeping everyone calm by facilitating clear and open communication. It will be important to keep emotions in check or words will fly that people may regret. This is a temporary situation. Everyone should be back on an even keel as soon as issues get properly aired.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Things could be up and down for you today, Cancer. You might experience some confusion as a result of communication snafus or computer glitches that affect financial issues you're trying to solve. Persevere and you'll succeed. Don't be surprised if you're recruited to join a project that is totally new to you. You may be apprehensive at first, but you'll do just fine. Go ahead and say yes.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

If you find yourself second-guessing plans you made earlier, Capricorn, perhaps for a plane trip, try to look objectively at your concerns. You don't have to cancel everything if you have money worries. Your fears will probably turn out to be unfounded. This could be a good time to look into learning more about modern technology, either by enrolling in a class or attending a lecture.



Leo (July 23-August 22)

You might be feeling a little tense because you and your partner are grappling with some thorny financial issues right now, Leo. You could be frustrated because you need to postpone some purchases or investments until the cash starts flowing more freely again. The good news is that this is a fine time to work out such a conflict to a satisfactory resolution. Both of you will need to be open-minded and look at all sides as you make your decisions.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

You might find yourself wrestling some ongoing, unresolved issues that could interfere with your ability to do your job. Be mindful that you're a bit brittle today, particularly if you're working on financial matters, Aquarius. The last thing you want is a major battle with those around you, so do your best to keep a cool head. Don't let uncontrolled emotions rule the day.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

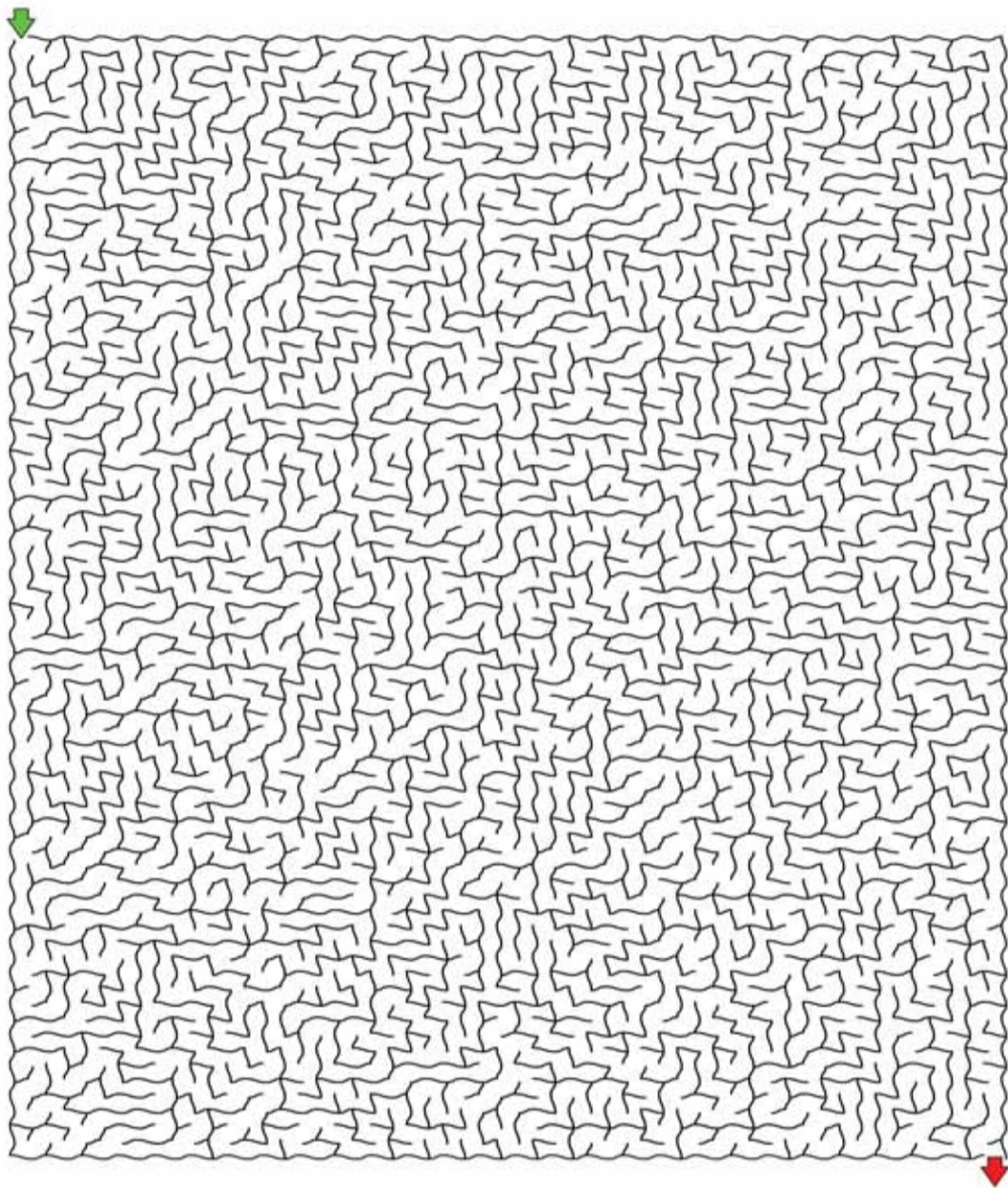
This will be an exciting day for you intellectually, Virgo. A number of intriguing concepts will catch your fancy, and you'll be hungry to learn more about them right away. Your research could take you to a library or onto the Internet. The topics might relate to social or political issues. As irresistible as these new ideas are, don't forget to tend to the business of everyday life.



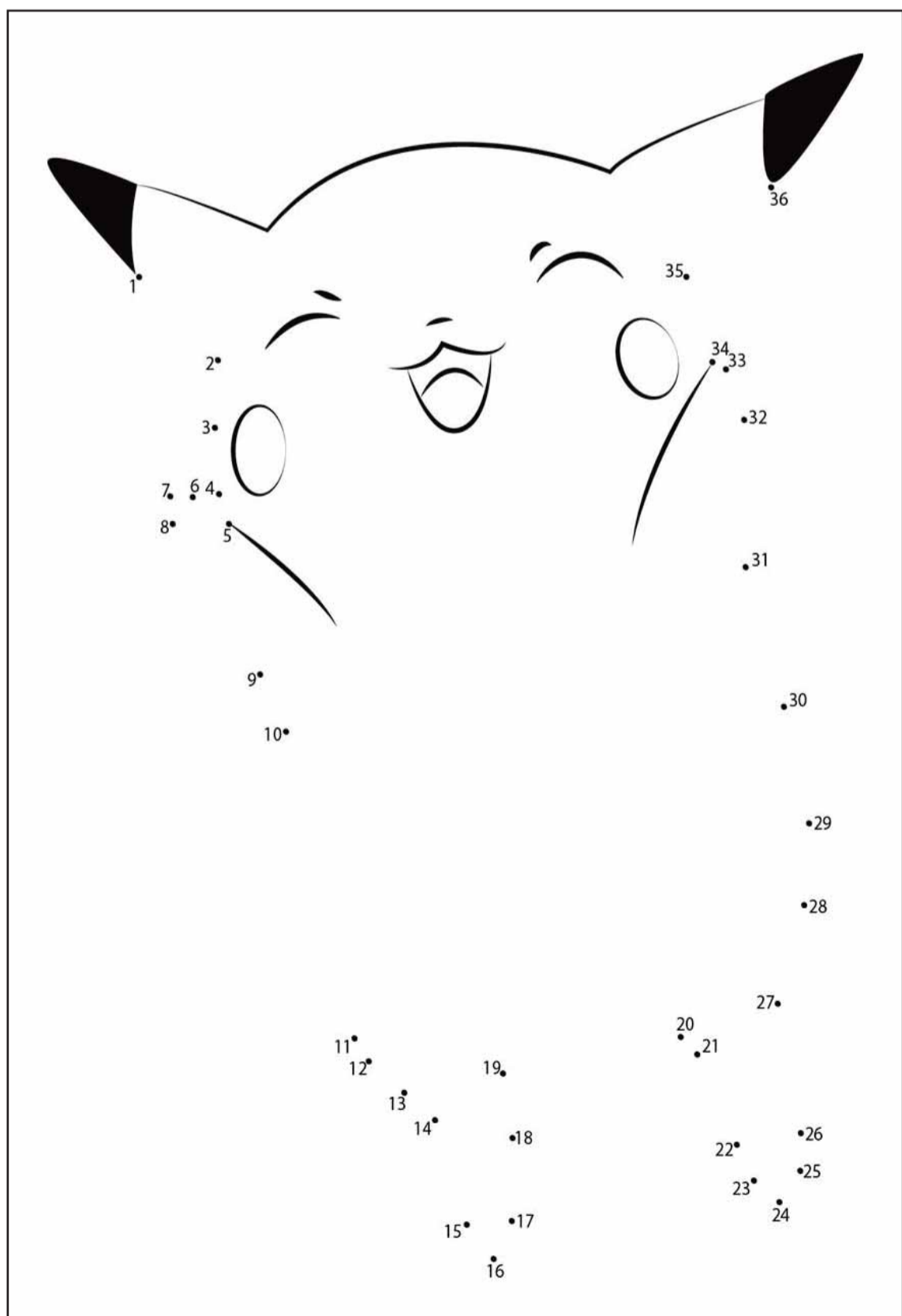
Pisces (February 19-March 20)

There is a possibility that you'll fall into a bit of a regression today as old feelings of anxiety or inadequacy surface. Although you've reached a good place in terms of self-confidence, some old childhood fears could resurface. The old emotions that bubble up could impede your interactions with your co-workers or friends today, so be mindful of what lies under the surface for you, Pisces.

Find the way



Join the dots



Crossword

Chinese New Year
CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 2. He is credited with naming the years of the Chinese after animals.
- 4. Plant that brings happiness, wealth and longevity.
- 5. Chinese New Year is known as the _____ Festival.
- 7. Number of animals in the Chinese calendar.
- 11. If you find this in your dumpling, you will have a year of good luck.
- 12. What children receive in red envelopes if they have been good.
- 14. Fruit said to represent luck and prosperity.
- 15. Season in which Chinese New Year takes place.

DOWN

- 1. What must you clean to be ready for Chinese New Year?
- 3. Animal traditionally represented in the Chinese New Year's Day parade.
- 6. Color that is believed to drive away bad luck.
- 8. These are decorated, hung in temples, and carried during a parade.
- 9. Animal for the year 2017 in the Chinese calendar.
- 10. Number of days in the Chinese New Year celebration.
- 13. Type of calendar that the Chinese New Year is based on.

Sports

Photo of the Day



Guenther Oka of the USA jumps to a rail during the Tomar Pro Wakeboard in Portugal. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Baseball, soccer seasons get underway in Taiwan

TAIPEI: The baseball and soccer seasons got underway behind closed doors in Taiwan at the weekend, providing rare live action for fans at home at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has shut down most professional sport around the globe.

Taiwan has been comparatively successful in containing the spread of the virus, reporting to date 388 cases and six deaths in a population of around 24 million. Globally, more than 110,000 people have died from the virus.

The Chinese Professional Baseball League's much delayed start was pushed back by a further 24 hours after rain swept across the island, forcing the postponement of the traditional season-opener on Saturday.

It therefore fell to Cuban lefthander Ariel Miranda, formerly of the Seattle Mariners, to throw the first pitch of the season for the Chinatrust Brothers against the Uni-President Lions at Taichung Intercontinental Baseball Stadium on Sunday.

Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen posted a picture on her Facebook page on Sunday of her watching the baseball match at home, accompanied by one of her cats, and calling on everyone else to join her and watch from home. "What's more important is once the epidemic is over, we'll see each other at the baseball pitch!" she wrote.

No fans were allowed in the 20,000-seater stadium to watch the Lions win 4-1, with health concerns limiting attendees to a total of 200 players, coaches, umpires, cheerleaders and journalists, local media reported. Rakuten Monkeys had placed cardboard cut-outs of fans replete with face masks in the stands for the washed-out game on Saturday, while anyone entering the baseball stadiums had their temperatures checked. — Reuters

Genia sees bright future for Red's scrumhalf McDermott

Double World Cup winner Steyn returns to Bloemfontein roots

SYDNEY: Former Wallaby Will Genia sees a bright future for Tate McDermott but only if the young Queensland Reds scrumhalf does not have his natural attacking instincts coached out of him.

McDermott, widely considered one of the most promising talents in Australian rugby, has been working with Genia while the former World Player of the Year nominee is stuck in Brisbane because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the 110-cap scrumhalf having retired from test rugby after last year's World Cup, new Wallabies coach Dave Rennie will be on the lookout for fresh talent to occupy the gold number nine shirt when the coronavirus lockdown ends.

Genia, who is contracted to play in Japan's Top League with the Kintetsu Liners this year, said McDermott was "a very, very good player" and might ultimately fit the bill.

"I definitely think he's got the game, he just needs to make sure he doesn't get that coached out of him," Genia told Rugby.com.au. "I just love how he plays off instinct, he's got that good balance with that attacking brand of rugby, he sees the breakdown and in anticipation he might do something, whether he runs or whether he's putting someone into space and I like watching him play heads-up footy."

"He needs to keep that attacking mindset ... be-

cause that makes him the player that he is. (We) don't want to coach those things out of him."

Genia famously worked with the instinctive talent of flyhalf Quade Cooper to help the Reds to the Super Rugby title and Australia to the World Cup semi-finals in 2011.

The 32-year-old said McDermott had proved "hungry to improve" and that they had been working on the specific skills of playing scrumhalf, such as

passing from left to right. Genia said he was being careful not to tamper with the 21-year-old's natural approach to the game, however.

"He's got something in his game not many other halfbacks in world rugby have, he's just got that really attacking mindset and the ability to get players in the game," said Genia.

"He's got a good ability to read space and fill space - you never want to coach that out of them and have that 'get to the breakdown, pass, get to the breakdown, pass' approach, you want to encourage him."

McDermott might have to wait a while to put Genia's tips into action on the pitch with Super Rugby suspended indefinitely because of the restrictions put into place to prevent the spread of the virus.

Meanwhile, double World Cup winner Frans Steyn is moving home to South Africa to play for the Free State Cheetahs, the Bloemfontein-based team an-



Will Genia

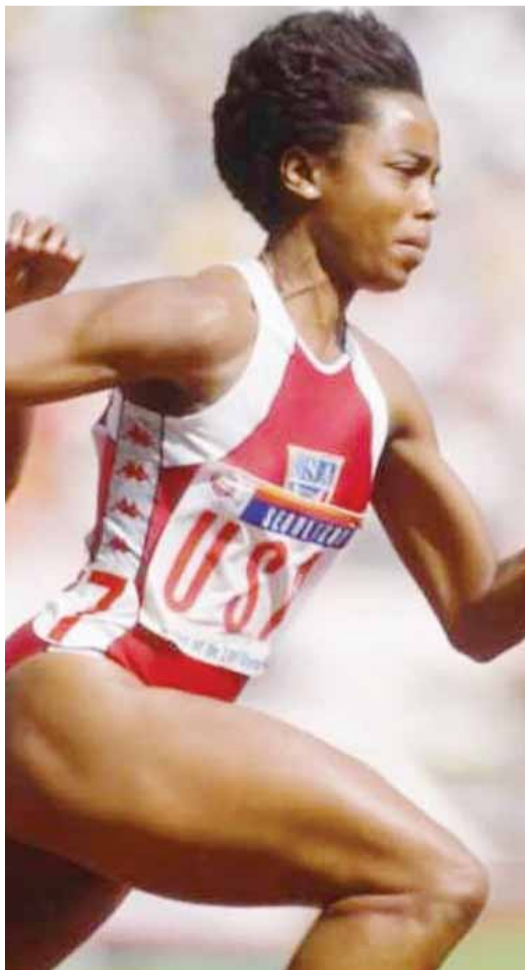
nounced on Monday.

It is a return to his roots for the 32-year-old, who was part of South Africa's World Cup winning teams in 2007 and 2019 but has never played for a Free State outfit since leaving school in Bloemfontein.

Steyn signed a two-year contract after four seasons at Montpellier in France. He moves on July 1, the Cheetahs said in a statement. His previous teams include the Sharks in Super Rugby; Racing Metro in

France and Toshiba Brave Lupus in Japan.

Steyn has won 67 caps since his Springbok debut while still a teenager. The Cheetahs, who were dropped from Super Rugby three years ago, play in the PRO-14 competition, suspended since last month because of the coronavirus pandemic. "Further to the signing of Frans Steyn, the majority of the players will remain with the Cheetahs for the following season," a club statement added. — Reuters



Evelyn Ashford

US sprinter Evelyn who smashed 100m world record

NEW YORK: On a warm July 1983 day in the Colorado mountains, a slender American woman literally reached the peak of female sprinting when she smashed the women's 100 metres world record that German athletes had owned for a decade.

Evelyn Ashford had beaten Marlies Gohr (100m) and Marita Koch (200m) in the 1979 World Cup of Athletics and now she had Gohr's 100 metres world record.

"I guess you could say I want to have it all," Ashford said in a 1983 interview with The New York Times before her record Colorado run of 10.79 seconds. In as many ways, she did have it all in a career loaded with ups and downs.

The Louisiana-born, California-raised sprinter grabbed Olympic gold in the women's 100 metres and 4x100 metres relay at the 1984 Los Angeles Games, becoming the first woman to run under 11 seconds in an Olympics, and added more gold in the 4x100 relay at the 1988 and 1992 Olympics.

There probably could have been more except for the United States' boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Twice, including the Colorado victory, she toppled the 100 metres world record. "When I'm running fast, I feel like I'm weightless," Ashford told Fortune magazine in 1991. "It's like

I'm flying, like I'm not even touching the ground."

The Colorado triumph was extraordinary because 15 minutes after Ashford's record run, compatriot Calvin Smith smashed the men's 100 metres world record. Never before had both 100 metres records tumbled on the same day.

"She always loved to sew and read, but running was her favorite because she was so good," her mother Vietta once said. Ashford's hero was one of America's greatest sprinters, the 1960 triple Olympic gold medalist Wilma Rudolph.

"I was 12 when I first heard about Wilma Rudolph, and since I knew I could run I wanted to be like her," Ashford recalled in an interview. Her quickness prompted the American football coach at her California high school to ask her to challenge his fastest player. Race won, Ashford became the only female member of the school's track team.

Speed and longevity were her trademarks. From finishing fifth in the 100 metres at the 1976 Montreal Olympic to winning gold in the 4x100 metres relay at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics at age 35, Ashford represented her country well and the honour of being the U.S. flag bearer was bestowed on her for the opening ceremony of the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

The gold medalist retired in 1992 but continued to do Olympic advisory work while raising her daughter Rain, who was born in 1985. "This is as close as I need to be to track and field. I am very satisfied with where I left the sport, what I accomplished in the sport," she told Don Mosley of the Sacramento Bee in April 2000. Once in the world spotlight, she has slipped into quieter times declining a request last week to talk about her golden days. — Reuters

Bolt goes viral with 'social distancing'

WASHINGTON: Retired track star Usain Bolt showed he's still a few steps ahead when he posted an AFP picture of him outstripping his rivals at the Beijing Olympics with the cheeky caption: "social distancing".

Bolt's post, featuring a picture by AFP photographer Nicolas Asfour of the 2008 Olympics 100m final, blew up on social media, drawing more than half a million likes and 90,000 retweets.

It showed the Jamaican crossing the finish line at the Bird's Nest stadium in a then-world record time of 9.69sec, glancing round from lane four as his despairing competitors trail two paces behind.

"Savage", commented one Twitter user, while New York Times journalist Christopher Clarey posted another picture of Bolt out in front on his own, captioned "self isolation". Bolt's chest-thumping celebration in Beijing added to a legend that grew further when he won the 200m in another world-record time. He retired in 2017 with eight Olympic gold medals and the current 100m mark of 9.58sec, set in 2009.

Bolt, 33, has been encouraging Jamaicans to self-isolate during the coronavirus pandemic, posting videos of himself exercising at home and juggling footballs with a friend. He also helped promote a major fundraiser, Telethon Jamaica. After retiring from athletics, Bolt, a Manchester United fan, attempted to launch a career in football, and had a trial with Australia's Central Coast Mariners before contract talks failed. — AFP

Sports

McIlroy hopes delayed Masters can help end wait for green jacket

PGA of America donates \$5 million to launch coronavirus relief fund

LOS ANGELES: World number one Rory McIlroy expects this year's Masters to feel a bit different and says the tournament being pushed back to November due to the COVID-19 pandemic could help him win the coveted green jacket.

The Masters is usually the year's first major but the event had been delayed from its April slot and will now take place after the US Open and PGA Championship, which were rescheduled for August and September. This year's British Open has been cancelled due to the outbreak. McIlroy, who needs the Masters to complete the career Grand Slam, said the new date would give it a "different feel".

"Two of the majors will have already been played, hopefully the Ryder Cup's already been played. People will be in their routine and in the flow a little bit more," he said in an Instagram Live chat with the US PGA's Michelle Wie.

"I always feel there's this bit of anticipation going into Augusta, the first big event of the year. There's all this hype. It's going to be a different Masters this year but personally, maybe selfishly, that's what I need to get the jacket."

The Northern Irishman won the US Open in 2011, the PGA Championship in 2012 and 2014, and the British Open in 2014 but his best showing at the Masters was fourth in 2015.

Meanwhile, the PGA of America donated \$5 million to launch the Golf Emergency Relief fund on

Monday, aiming to provide support for the golf industry during the coronavirus pandemic.

The body, whose flagship event the US PGA Championship has been postponed from May amid the shelter-in-place policies designed to slow spread of the virus, pledged to match up to an additional \$2.5 million given by other groups.

A statement said the PGA of America contribution included all members of its executive team voluntarily reducing their compensation. The board of directors pledged personal donations.

"There's pain everywhere," PGA chief executive Seth Waugh said. "It's how to get to the other side. The government is doing extraordinary things. The Fed actions last week were stunning. The loan programs are very clever to keep people employed. The bad news is it may not be enough depending on how long this lasts."

I need to get the jacket

"What we're saying is, 'How can we create an additional safety net?'" The fund will be administered by E4E Relief, an independent public charity. The PGA, which represents club professionals, has nearly 29,000 members. But PGA president Suzy Whaley said it's hoped the fund will help members of other golf organizations, club caddies and players on developmental tours.

"We have to ensure that the heart and soul of our game — our people — are able to get back on their feet and continue to serve others down the road,"



Rory McIlroy

Whaley said. "Eventually, golf will return, but we first need to reach out and help people in our industry during this national emergency."

The PGA said other organizations, including the US PGA Tour and the LPGA, the US Golf Association are supporting the fund, as are groups representing course superintendents, course owners and merchan-

disers.

"Our hope is the industry gets behind it," Whaley said. Applications are to be accepted starting from tomorrow. The first phase will distribute \$500 grants for basic needs and \$1,500 grants for critical needs. A second phase will make funds available up to \$3,500 depending on need. —Agencies

IPL awaits Indian government verdict

NEW DELHI: The fate of this year's Indian Premier League rests in the hands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the country's cricket board said Monday.

The world's richest Twenty20 tournament has been postponed until today, which coincides with the end of India's 21-day nationwide shutdown to halt the

spread of the pandemic. Modi will address the nation Tuesday and is expected to extend the curfew for another two weeks following a recent surge to nearly 10,000 cases with more than 320 deaths.

"Right now, the picture is very hazy. We don't even know when the lockdown will end and if we don't know, how can we even have a meaningful discussion," Board of Control for Cricket in India treasurer Arun Dhumal was quoted as saying by Press Trust of India news agency.

"Once we get a clarity from the government, we can then sit and take fresh stock of the situation. Any

speculation about its future will be premature."

BCCI president Sourav Ganguly also gave a downbeat assessment at the weekend, without giving a definitive prediction for the IPL. "Practically speaking, when life has come to a standstill everywhere in the world, where does sport have a future in this," he said. The league is a huge revenue earner for the BCCI and is estimated to generate more than \$11 billion a year for the Indian economy. Former cricketers including England's Kevin Pietersen have suggested the eight-team tournament be shortened from its normal eight-week duration and played behind closed doors. —AFP

Border can't imagine T20 World Cup without fans

MELBOURNE: Former Australia captain Allan Border said yesterday he cannot even imagine the prospect of hosting this year's Twenty20 World Cup at empty stadiums due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The health crisis, which has prompted travel restrictions and quarantine periods in countries around the world, has clouded the outlook for the format's flagship tournament, which is scheduled to begin in Geelong on Oct. 18.

The idea of playing in empty stadiums to give cricket-starved fans live action on television has found some backing but the 64-year-old Border is not a fan of the concept, especially for a World Cup. "I just can't imagine playing at empty stadiums ... it defies belief," he told Fox Sports News.

"Having teams, support staff and everyone else associated with the game wandering around the country, playing games of cricket, but you can't let people into the grounds. I just can't see it happening."

"It's either you play it and everyone just gets on with the job and we're past this pandemic. Or it just has to be cancelled and you try to fit it in somewhere else," said Border, who led Australia to their first 50-over World Cup victory in 1987.

The virus has so far infected about 6,400 Aus-

tralian and led to 61 deaths. All-rounder Glenn Maxwell expressed similar sentiments at the weekend. "It's going to be hard for us to justify having a World Cup when we can't get people into the grounds," Maxwell told ABC Grandstand.

"So I can't see it happening in the near future." The governing International Cricket Council and local organisers are working on contingency plans but expect the tournament to go ahead as planned.

Meanwhile, Australia spinner Nathan Lyon says Tim Paine has been "absolutely incredible" since taking over as test captain during turbulent times and expects the wicketkeeper to continue in the role for the foreseeable future.

Paine was handed the job in 2018 after then-captain Steve Smith was banned for 12 months for his part in a ball-tampering scandal in South Africa.

Australia lost a first home series to India but retained the Ashes last year under Paine, who has said he would back Smith's return to the job after he served a further one-year ban from leadership roles.

However, Lyon says Paine is growing into the role. "Tim Paine has been absolutely incredible for the Australian cricket team," he told reporters in a video conference yesterday.

"The way he's gone out and led this team, it's been unbelievable to be honest ... I truly believe that he's growing each and every day, he seems to be getting better as captain."

The spinner said Paine took on the mantle in the most challenging of circumstances. "If you looked around that change-room at that time, I think Tim Paine really got up in my eyes, really stood up and could take that challenge on," he added.



Allan Border

"He took the captaincy on in the hardest time in Australian cricket and he's done an amazing job." With Australia postponing their tour of Bangladesh in June in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lyon is looking forward to India's return later this year, even if the matches have to be played behind closed doors.

"I'm excited about the prospect of India coming out to Australia, it's up there with the biggest series alongside the Ashes," he said. "Playing in front of crowds or no crowds is out of our control, we've got to follow the advice of all the amazing medical people around the world." — Reuters

NASCAR driver Larson suspended after racial slur

LOS ANGELES: US driver Kyle Larson has been indefinitely suspended from the NASCAR stock car series after using a racial slur during a live-streamed virtual race on Sunday.

"NASCAR has made diversity and inclusion a priority and will not tolerate the type of language used by Kyle Larson during Sunday's iRacing event," NASCAR said in a statement on Monday.

"Our Member Conduct Guidelines are clear in this regard, and we will enforce these guidelines to maintain an inclusive environment for our entire industry and fan base."

NASCAR's action followed Larson's suspension without pay by his Chip Ganassi Racing team, and sponsors Credit One Bank and McDonald's were quick to distance themselves from the driver.

"Credit One Bank denounces the highly offensive language used by Kyle Larson during Sunday's iRacing event," the financial institution said in a statement posted on its Twitter account. "In addition to the quick actions taken by NASCAR and Chip Ganassi Racing, Credit One Bank is terminating its sponsorship of Kyle Larson."

McDonald's USA said in a statement: "The comments made by Kyle Larson are insensitive, offensive and not reflective of our inclusive values and will not be tolerated. McDonald's is taking immediate action to terminate the relationship with Larson."

Larson himself has benefitted from NASCAR's attempts to increase diversity in its ranks. His mother is Japanese-American and he rose from short-track racing into NASCAR's upper echelon through its "Drive for Diversity" program.

The 27-year-old posted a video on social media platforms on Monday morning apologizing. "I just want to say I'm sorry," he said. "Last night I made a mistake and said the word that should never, ever be said. There's no excuse for that."

Larson offered apologies to his family, his coworkers and the African-American community. "I understand the damage is probably irreparable," he said. "I own up to it." The Chip Ganassi Racing team said in a statement it was "extremely disappointed" with Larson's choice of an "offensive and unacceptable" slur.

Larson was taking part in the Monza Madness iRacing exhibition race late on Sunday. The virtual races are a chance for fans to connect with drivers as sports are shut down amid the coronavirus pandemic.

A video from another competitor's Twitch stream picked up the slur on the audio channel that allows competitors to hear each other. In the video, Larson, appearing to think he is not connected to the stream, said: "You can't hear me? Hey (racial slur)." Xfinity driver Anthony Alfredo then said: "Kyle, you're talking to everyone, bud." — AFP

Cycling faces economic 'meltdown'

PARIS: The Tour de France is not only a French monument, but also the economic heartbeat of professional cycling itself and analysts fear heavy consequences if the coronavirus crisis forces its cancellation.

An announcement is expected this week on either a postponement or an outright cancellation of the 21-day extravaganza that is currently scheduled to start in Nice on June 27. The "Grande Boucle", as the Tour is known in France, is the central economic pillar which supports the 22 professional teams on the roster for 2020.

"Cancellation opens the door to a possible economic meltdown in the cycling sector," says Jean-Francois Mignot of the French National Centre for Scientific Research, who has written the book "A History of the Tour de France".

Maintaining the original dates looks almost impossible following French President Emmanuel Macron's announcement on Monday that public events with large crowds were banned until at least mid-July.

France has been under lockdown since March 17,

and nearly 15,000 people have died from coronavirus in the country. Usually, up to 12 million fans line the roads as the Tour makes its way through the French countryside and towns and cities for three weeks every summer.

"It's as simple as this. If the Tour does not take place, teams could disappear, riders and staff alike would find themselves unemployed," said Marc Madiot, the chief of top French outfit Groupama-FDJ.

His team budget is estimated at 20 million euros (\$21.8 million) per year and is bankrolled by the state lottery and an insurance company.

TOUR ROLLS ON ADVERTISING REVENUE

Tour de France organisers Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO) paid 2.3 million euros in total prize money on the 2019 edition, won by Ineos' Colombian rider Egan Bernal who picked up a cheque for 500,000 euros.

The Tour rakes in revenue but the giant cost of staging the event, featuring logistics that are as spectacular as any mountainside showdown on two wheels, eat into the margins of all road races.

Sponsors are paying hard cash for the daily hours-long television coverage and even the smallest teams can get involved in a breakaway and hence command screen time. There are ceremonies every day on the Tour de France for all kinds of prizes — sprinting, climbing, attacking, young riders — where sponsors' names are prominent.

"Most sponsors are in cycling for this reason alone, the whole thing is centred around the Tour

de France," Mignot claimed. "If these sponsors invest money it is because television viewers recognise the team jerseys, it is the only cycling race watched by such a vast audience."

"There are very few other sports with so much riding on one event," explains Bruno Bianzina, the general manager of the agency Sport Market.

Mignot estimated that ASO's Tour revenue has climbed from five million euros in the mid-80s to 50 million today. Another group, Sporsora, put the turnover for the 2019 Tour de France at 130 million euros.

Some 40-50 percent comes from sponsors, television rights make up around half, and host regions of the race also contribute around five percent. This would make up more than half the turnover ASO declared in 2018, which according to Infogreffe.fr was 233.5 million euros. ASO did not reply to questions from AFP.

'PROPS UP CYCLING'

"The Tour de France props up the whole of cycling, but the Tour needs the rest of the cycling calendar too," says Madiot, a two-time winner of the Paris-Roubaix one-day race. Even the smallest sponsor pays 250,000 euros to ASO while it is estimated that the yellow jersey sponsor, the LCL bank, pay 10 million euros.

"But it goes much deeper than that because the Tour de France is also a huge advert for France and French tourism," Bianzina says. — AFP

18 Genia sees bright future for Red's scrumhalf McDermott



19 McIlroy hopes delayed Masters can help end wait for green jacket



19 Border can't imagine T20 WCup without fans



EPL transfer embargo could follow wage cuts

Southampton took wage deferrals to help local community: Ward-Prowse



LONDON: File photo shows Tottenham Hotspur's English striker Harry Kane has an unsuccessful shot during the English Premier League football match in London. Former Manchester United captain Gary Neville believes the Premier League may force clubs who are looking to cut player wages during the coronavirus crisis to accept transfer embargoes. — AFP

LONDON: Former Manchester United captain Gary Neville believes the Premier League may force clubs who are looking to cut player wages during the coronavirus crisis to accept transfer embargoes.

Clubs in England's top-flight have requested players take up to a 30 percent pay hit in cuts and deferrals to help soften the estimated £1 billion (\$1.2 billion) blow of potentially failing to complete the season.

A number of Premier League clubs, including Tottenham, have also been fiercely criticised for using public money to shore up the wages of non-playing staff before cutting the salaries of players.

Liverpool quickly reversed their decision to use the UK government's furlough scheme, which guarantees 80 percent of wages up to a maximum of £2,500 a month, after a backlash from supporters and the media last week.

Neville said Tottenham striker Harry Kane would be the "perfect" signing for his old club Manchester United, but dismissed speculation over the England captain's future in the current climate.

"The Premier League spent £1.4 billion last summer on transfers and the previous three summers they also spent over £1 billion. If you're trying to get 30 percent

pay cuts from existing players, you may have to put a transfer embargo in place," Neville told Sky Sports.

"Transfers are things the fans love, and we love players moving around, but it does seem to me to be awry when we've got such a behind-the-scenes war going on with respect to players taking cuts, the clubs needing support, and then in the next breath you've got a £200 million transfer speculation going on."

Kane, who has been sidelined by a hamstring injury since New Year's Day, opened the door to leaving Spurs last month.

"If I don't feel we're progressing as a team or going in the right direction, then I'm not someone to just stay there for the sake of it," said Kane in an Instagram chat with former Spurs midfielder Jamie Redknapp.

Neville and Redknapp believe that Tottenham's conduct during the crisis will not have sat well with Kane.

"He's a clever lad and he's not somebody who would get caught out if he didn't want to say something. The little opening of the door that he left in that Instagram piece with Jamie was probably something that had something in it," added Neville.

"In my mind, I think he would have been warning them and saying 'just be careful because I'm watching

you and it's not something that we do'."

Redknapp said the action taken by Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy to furlough staff on the same day it was revealed he was paid £7 million last season did not surprise him.

"Kane would have been extremely disappointed with how Tottenham have acted but I have to be honest, having been around Tottenham and played for them, it didn't surprise me how Levy acted in this," said Redknapp.

"You learn a lot about someone in difficult times and he was one of the first to furlough staff.

"There's no doubt at all that Kane would have been disappointed with that, but I certainly wasn't surprised."

Meanwhile, Southampton's players and senior staff wanted to protect the club and repay their community when they accepted wage deferrals and were not influenced by external pressure, vice-captain James Ward-Prowse has said.

The club were the first in the Premier League to announce that players and coaching staff would defer part of their salaries for April, May and June to help weather the shutdown brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Premier League has been suspended indefinitely

due to the outbreak, with the UK on lockdown to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. "It was never about doing it quickly or facing any pressure," midfielder Ward-Prowse told the BBC <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/52274265>. "It was about making sure we made the right decision for the people and the community and we definitely have done that."

"We wanted to make a good, mature, calculated decision on what was needed. It wasn't done for a 'well done, you're the first club to do it'. It was done out of thinking ahead and thinking what is best for the club and the community."

With the Premier League at a standstill, footballers are facing pressure to accept wage cuts. The players union, however, questioned the league's call for a 30% player wage reduction, saying it would reduce tax revenue for the National Health Service.

Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur have both reversed decisions to furlough non-playing staff members after fierce criticism of the moves, while West Ham United followed Southampton by announcing wage deferrals for players. Southampton were 14th in the table when the league was suspended. — Reuters

Mother-of-four diving into an Olympic comeback

TOKYO: If you are Laura Wilkinson, a 42-year-old mother making your return to competitive diving after under-going spinal fusion surgery, a year delay in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics is not a bad thing — it's a gift.

For those wondering why a mother of four is throwing herself off a 10-metre tower, you have to look back two decades when Wilkinson's name might have been familiar. It was a new millennium and Wilkinson, despite being hobbled by a broken foot, had just spectacularly won gold on the 10-metre platform at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Her triumph ended Chinese domination of the event stretching back to the 1984 Los Angeles Games.

No American woman diver has won Olympic gold in any diving discipline since.

Comebacks have long been a staple of the sporting genre but Wilkinson's return has all the elements of a unique feel-good story.

Her journey not only evokes memories of Tiger

Woods' comeback following career-saving back surgery, but also exhibits the same kind of determination Serena Williams has shown in returning to competition after giving birth.

To top it off, Wilkinson will also be facing an element of danger that neither Woods or Williams have to contend with when they are swinging a club or a racket respectively. Living with the risk that one small miss-step while crashing into the water at 38 mph might leave you a paraplegic adds another layer of drama to what is already a compelling return.

Throw in a coronavirus pandemic that has turned the sporting world upside down and delayed the 2020 Tokyo Games for a year, Wilkinson, should she earn one of two spots on the U.S. squad, will be 43 when she steps onto the Olympic tower again.

Her goal is not just to climb back to the top of an Olympic 10-metre platform but to stand on top of the podium by becoming the oldest woman diver to win gold. That record currently belongs to China's Wu Minxia, who was 30 when she won the synchronized three metre springboard at the 2016 Rio Games.

"This is something I never thought I would be able to do again," Wilkinson told Reuters in a phone interview from her Texas home. "People just tend to retire in my sport in their early 20s and that's it, you just never think you are going to do it again." "I kind of feel

like I was made for it so to have another opportunity is such a gift."

Wilkinson was one of those "people" as she dived into a new life to raise a family when injury prevented her from competing at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

She had two children with her husband Erik and adopted two more but the sport took up permanent residence in the back of her mind. "I don't think I ever wanted to be done with diving," said Wilkinson. "The idea of coming back was kind of always there especially when I watched the next two Olympics and the quality wasn't as high as when I was diving in 2008."

"After Rio I talked to my coach and asked if it would be crazy." Her long time coach Kenny Armstrong was soon on board and plans were put in place for an Olympic return. In the background there were doubters but it was not the first time Wilkinson had heard she was too old.

As a young girl Wilkinson's goal was to become a gymnast but a growth spurt in her early teens ended that dream. So she switched to diving only to be told she was too old for a new sport and was kicked off her high school team.

"As far as can she do it (Olympics), there was no doubt in my mind at all," Armstrong told Reuters. "I think they (young divers) are a little intimidated, it makes them sit up at the table a little bit straighter.—Reuters



Laura Wilkinson