



# Trump freezes WHO funds as world weighs easing lockdown

50 new cases in Kuwait • Bahrain car park becomes ICU • 2,228 US deaths in 24 hrs

## Social distancing needed until 2022

WASHINGTON: A one-time lockdown won't halt the novel coronavirus and repeated periods of social distancing may be required into 2022 to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed, Harvard scientists who modeled the pandemic's trajectory said Tuesday. Their study comes as the US enters the peak of its COVID-19 case-load and states eye an eventual easing of tough lockdown measures.

The Harvard team's computer simulation, which was published in a paper in the journal Science, assumed that COVID-19 will become seasonal, like closely related coronaviruses that cause the common cold, with higher transmission rates in colder months. But much remains unknown, including the level of immunity acquired by previous infection and how long it lasts, the authors said.

"We found that one-time social distancing measures are likely to be insufficient to maintain the incidence of SARS-CoV-2 within the limits of critical care capacity in the United States," lead author Stephen Kissler said in a call with reporters.

Continued on Page 16

KUWAIT/WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump ordered a freeze on funding for the World Health Organization for "mismanaging" the coronavirus crisis, as world leaders weighed easing lockdowns that threaten to tip the global economy into a second Great Depression. The death toll from the pandemic has topped 125,000, with nearly two million people infected by the disease that has upended society and changed lives for billions confined to their homes around the globe.

The health ministry yesterday reported 50 new coronavirus cases in Kuwait, raising the total to 1,405 cases and three deaths. Of the new cases, 32 are Indians. Of the 1,196 patients receiving treatment, 31 are in intensive care, including 15 cases in critical condition. The ministry also announced 30 new recoveries, raising the total number to 206 recoveries, while 2,285 people have been discharged from quarantine.

World leaders are agonizing over when to lift lockdown measures to jump-start devastated economies but still avoid a second wave of infections. And with the world battling to get on top of the pandemic, Trump fired a broadside at the WHO and halted payments that amounted to \$400 million last year. Funding would be frozen pending a review into the WHO's role in "severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus," said Trump, who accused the Geneva-based body of putting "political correctness above life-saving measures".

The outbreak could have been contained "with very little death" if the WHO had accurately assessed the situation in China, where the disease



RIFFA, Bahrain: Medical staff are seen in the newly-inaugurated intensive care unit for COVID-19 patients at the Bahrain Defense Force Hospital on Tuesday. — AFP

broke out late last year, charged Trump. Beijing hit back, saying the move was bad for the global fight. "The current global epidemic situation is grim. It is at a critical moment. This US decision will weaken WHO's capacities and undermine the international cooperation against the epidemic," said Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian.

Trump also earned a rebuke from the head of the UN and entrepreneur Bill Gates who tweeted that cutting funding was "as dangerous as it sounds". The president's controversial attack came as the US count-

ed a record of 2,228 victims over the past 24 hours, according to Johns Hopkins University. Nevertheless, Trump vowed to reboot large sections of the world's top economy "very soon", saying the US would reopen "in beautiful little pieces", with the hardest-hit areas such as New York taking slightly longer.

The International Monetary Fund laid bare the scale of the economic catastrophe, saying the "Great Lockdown" could wipe \$9 trillion from the global economy in its worst downturn since the

Continued on Page 16

# V O L V O

# STAY SAFE STAY HOME





## Local

# Ministry asks for payrolls to confirm teachers' payments

## Department received March salary nonpayment complaints

By Faten Omar

**KUWAIT:** The private education department of the ministry of education sent an official letter asking schools that have been reported for violations to send records of their payrolls to confirm that all teachers have received their full wages. The letter sent by Private Education Department Director Sanad Al-Mutairi was based on complaints the department received against some schools.

The letter reads: "Implementation of the circular issued by the ministry of education represented by the private education department on April 1, 2020 regarding commitment to pay the wages of workers in private schools during the suspension according to the Cabinet decision due to the coronavirus outbreak. In light of the complaints received by the general administration of private education from a number of employees at private schools regarding failure to pay their salaries for March 2020, the general administration of private education has requested the payrolls for the month of March from private schools to review and audit in preparation for taking the necessary legal actions against the schools that are proven to be in violation, in coordination with the relevant authorities (financial

department of the ministry of education/Public Authority for Manpower)."

The ministry of education issued on April 2, 2020 a circular, according to law no. 6 of 2010, giving the ministry authority to take legal, financial and administrative measures if private schools failed to pay wages to their employees. The ministry's private education sector will take legal action against any school failing to pay the wages of its employees. The circular affirmed that the schools are obligat-

ed to pay employees their wages according to their work contracts during the period of suspension in the private schools, including their entitlement to salaries during the summer break.

On April 5, the private education department launched a website (<https://privateeducationkw.com/cor2/>) to receive any complaints or inquiries from schools, parents, or teachers. Regarding failure to pay salaries, the department noted that the complaint must be filed seven days after the actual date of payment.

Hundreds of expatriate teachers in Kuwait contacted Kuwait Times following the closure of schools to report failure of their schools to pay wages or to note that schools were cutting salaries or paying late. Kuwait Times previously reported that all private schools are required to pay teachers through August as per the terms of their contracts.



### Legal action in case of nonpayment

## ACK launches e-learning program

**KUWAIT:** In line with recent decisions by the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Education, and the Private Universities Council (PUC), the Australian College of Kuwait (ACK) has launched its distance learning (e-learning) program that is open to all students for all programs of study. This initiative is part of ACK's efforts to reduce educational delays for students in light of the difficult present situation caused by the coronavirus. The distance learning program will enable participating students to immediately resume their spring semester of 2019/2020 and conclude the semester before the planned August continuation for live classes on campus.

The distance learning (e-learning) program officially commenced on April 12, 2020 and the first week is a trial period for students to decide if they feel comfortable with this means of learning. Those who remain with the online program will conclude their semester on June 9, 2020.

Professor Isam Zabalawi, President of ACK, presented an online speech to ACK students and parents to introduce the program. Prof Zabalawi highlighted the efforts by ACK in working with its international partners and the PUC to maximize the benefits of the program to students. He explained that ACK carefully prepared the associated technological infrastructure so that students could log on from home and be fully linked to faculty through a range of electronic learning mediums and also

participate in online work teams with other students. Depending on the nature of individual courses of study, faculty can choose between pre-taped or live online classes and as appropriate with Power point slides with voice commentary.

Intensive electronic training programs have been arranged for all academic and administrative staff to ensure that students are fully supported in their transition from in-class to online learning and assessment. A special Web link has been established as an ongoing resource to students in using the distance learning structure. In addition, all faculty and Student Affairs staff are available electronically on-a-one to one basis to chat online with students and work through any challenges associated with either their learning progression or general concerns regarding their life as a student.

Prof Zabalawi emphasized that the program will particularly benefit students in their final semester so they can graduate on time. However, he also encouraged all students to participate in this online learning opportunity, adding that digitization will continue to permeate all aspects of our lives, communication, work and learning. Therefore, those students who gain experience in online learning now will be better prepared to take advantage of growing employment and self-employment opportunities associated with electronic work environment nationally and internationally. In this regard, Prof Isam referred to the exponential growth in demand for online products and services during the pandemic and once consumers develop relationships with their electronic suppliers then many of these dealings will continue beyond the virus crisis. Accordingly, Prof Zabalawi urged that all students use their time



productively and maintain their momentum with their studies during this period of isolation. He commented, "Many companies are now looking to hire those with the ability to work from home, and therefore we feel that learning online is a steppingstone to prepare graduates to work from home."

The ACK website, portal and social media accounts are constantly being updated with information to ensure a sound understanding of the

electronic learning program. Further, a live stream will be held on Instagram to answer any questions or concerns from students and parents regarding the distance learning (e-learning) program. The session will be held on Thursday, April 16, 2020, at 12:00 pm and extracts from the streams are now on social media. Students and parents are also invited to send emails with any queries to [studentaffairs@ack.edu.kw](mailto:studentaffairs@ack.edu.kw) and replies will be sent as quickly as possible.

### Pandemic Diaries

## A day of 'staying at home'



By Jamie Etheridge

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**6 am:** Wake up and make coffee. Start breakfast and check the news. Nearly 2 million confirmed COVID-19 cases around the world, almost half a million recoveries, 126,000+ deaths. I try not to think about their families, the ones who died. The dads and moms with little ones at home. The breadwinners who supported their families.

**7 am:** Start work from home. Get online. Read and respond to emails. Check the news again for latest updates and get going. Write the column, talk with reporters. Plan the day.

The US leads the league tables with more than 612,000 confirmed cases, nearly 50,000 recoveries and almost 26,000 deaths. It's expected to worsen before it gets better.

**8 am:** Wake up the children and get them ready for e-learning. They have breakfast, dress and head to their study desks.

Kuwait begins bringing home more than 50,000 citizens from abroad. The infections here have been rising exponentially for the past week but yesterday's numbers were promising. Only 55 new infections. Hope this is the start of a downward trend in new infections.

**9 am-5 pm:** Work. Actually work happens all day long from waking to sleeping but I need some sort of structure so this is what I tell myself. I often forget to take breaks, to get up from my computer. The news is mostly heartbreaking.

Small businesses in Kuwait start to go under. An estimated 250,000 people here are now out of work, have lost their jobs or had their salaries cut. We're only one month into the lockdown.

**6 pm:** Dinner and family time. We play Pictionary and the girls draw stick figures coughing into their elbows. I pretend not to notice.

Some places are starting to plan reopening, utilizing the twin Ts of testing and tracing to locate and lock down pockets of outbreaks and keep the economy open. Praying that this works.

**9 pm:** Bedtime for the children. I check the news again, do more work. Wait for statements from the Cabinet. Wait for normal life to return.

**10 pm:** Another day passed. Stay at home orders obeyed. Doing our part to flatten the curve.

## Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait has so far recorded 1,405 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), in addition to three deaths. With the exception of 31 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, 206 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, the ministry said. There are 1,196 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.moc.shop](http://www.moc.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](http://www.pai.gov.kw), and send the form via email to: [jasiri@moh.gov.kw](mailto: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 grades.

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-Aslamaya School - Block 4 - Street 200, while male violators are received at Nacem 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-health.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 Muneera 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 GDP at \$130 billion in 2019, economy grew 0.4 percent

## Services accounted to 18.6 percent of the GDP

**KUWAIT:** The Kuwaiti economy grew 0.4 percent in 2019 compared to 2018 where gross domestic product amounted to KD 39.4 billion (\$130 billion), Kuwait Central Statistical Bureau said in a statement Tuesday. The GDP, by current rates, shrank three percent in Q4 2019 compared to the same period in 2018. It also grew by 2.6 percent, by fixed prices, compared to Q3 2018. Oil sector contributed to the GDP, by fixed prices, with KD 4.5 billion (\$14.8 billion), 43.9 percent, and this stake rose to KD 5.2 billion (\$17 billion), with a 52.8 percent contribution. Non-oil domestic product, by fixed prices, grew in Q4 2019 by 0.6 percent, compared to the same period in 2018, while growth was at 3.5 percent compared to Q3 2019. Contribution of the crude oil and natural gas production, comparing Q4 2019 with corresponding period 2018, fell from 53.6 percent to 52.8 percent—also by steady rates. Added value of this activity grew by 3.2 percent as compared to the

same value in Q3 2019, amid bullish oil prices and production increase.

Manufacturing industries, including oil derivatives, accounted to 6.5 percent of the GDP and 6.7 percent by the fixed prices. Retail and wholesale trade declined in Q4 2019 by 2.6 percent compared to the same period in 2018, where added value of this sector amounted to KD 363.2 million (\$1.2 billion), with a contribution estimated at 3.6 percent of the quarterly GDP. Meanwhile, added value of financial brokerage, also by fixed prices, fell by 0.2 percent in Q4, posting KD 805 million (\$2.6 million) compared to the same period in 2018. Services, including education, health, restaurants, hotels and real estate, accounted to 18.6 percent of the GDP, with the value standing at KD 1.8 billion (\$5.9 billion). Value activity of the public administration and defense amounted in Q4 to KD one billion (\$3.3 billion), growing by 2.4 percent in contrast to the same period last year. — KUNA



**GDP down 3% in Q4 2019**



## System predicts Kuwait COVID-19 cases to start falling by mid-May

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

**KUWAIT:** A team of researchers from the Dasman Diabetes Institute and Kuwait University managed to develop a model and a study on the spread of COVID-19 in Kuwait under the title of 'Predictive Mathematical Model of SARS-CoV-2'. Dasman Diabetes Institute General Manager Dr Qais Al-Duwairi explained that the model is based on the SEIR system with special modifications to match the situation in Kuwait, adding that the model proved the effectiveness of the measures taken by the government

to contain infection since day one, including suspending schools and closing restaurants and shopping malls, as well as applying institutional and home quarantine, which has greatly and effectively isolated infected cases arriving from outside Kuwait. The study also showed that in view of the current indicators of the natural course of the pandemic, cases will increase until the second half of May, then start falling. Kuwait has recorded over 1,000 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), in addition to three deaths, since the outbreak started in the country in early March.

## Vehicles, machinery entering Kuwait sanitized



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Fire Service Directorate (KFSD) is installing jetting machines at land checkpoints and the airport to sanitize incoming trucks and hardware. Personnel at the KFSD vehicles and equipment department have manufactured the disinfecting

stands for installment at the land border points, Al-Nwaiseeb and Al-Salmi, as well as Kuwait International Airport. They will be employed to sanitize incoming trucks and machines, the KFSD said in a statement on Tuesday. These stands are manned by

KFSD officers. Kuwait has taken a series of preventive and protective measures against the novel coronavirus outbreak. It observes a nighttime curfew amid suspension of businesses and various transports inside, to and from the country. —KUNA



**KUWAIT:** Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of State for Economic Affairs Mariam Al-Aqeel took a tour on Tuesday at a makeshift co-operative society branch set up in Mahboula to serve area residents. The area has been put under total lockdown along with Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh as part of efforts to curb the spread of the disease. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

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Local



KUWAIT: The Awazem charity foundation distributed food to laborers and families in need in Salwa impacted by the effects of the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). —Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

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## LAPA opens online workshops

KUWAIT: Within its social responsibilities and out of its keenness on providing youth with opportunities to fruitfully make use of their free time during the current curfew, LOYAC's Academy for Performance Arts (LAPA) resumed its LAPA Talent Club workshops for children online as an alternative to traditional learning.

LAPA's new creative online lessons will be interactive ones prepared in collaboration with local and international trainers using enjoyable applications that help students assimilate information in a better way.

The lessons include training courses on playing several musical instruments and singing supervised by maestro Yousif Bara, the head of the music department, Nisreen Nasser and a group of professional local and international musicians. The music department also provides the 'Family singing program' for all family members.

The club also provides dancing and performance lessons by trainers, Mohammed Al-Eidan, Teni Matyan, Zoki, Sanslas Kumar and Anna Muskiza. In addition, the club provides formative arts course supervised by formative artist, Amira Bahbehani as well as drama and acting lessons supervised by Sara Attallah. In this regard, LOYAC's chairperson Fare'a Al-Saqqa said that the aim of those online workshops is to help children utilize their time fruitfully during the current curfew. Saqqa added that further online programs would soon be launched for youth as the curfew hours are times ought to be utilized in communicating with children and youth in new manners to help them develop their skills.



## Coronavirus once again



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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**T**he coronavirus, which surfaced in a Chinese seafood and poultry market late last year, has spread to at least 177 countries, killing more than 75,000 and sickening more than one million in a matter of weeks. The World Health Organization has declared the situation a pandemic, and if neglected, it can be highly invasive. Once it reaches its destination - the respiratory system - it takes a foothold, and fighting it is a real struggle and a long and painful process.

Statistics show how dangerous the number of cases are in five developed European countries and the US - infections reached 1,220,584 by Tuesday morning and deaths 90,484 for the same period.

The danger of this disease is that the people may be infected with it for 1 to 14 days before starting to feel the symptoms, such as fever, tiredness and dry cough, while 80 percent of people may recover without needing special treatment. But even asymptomatic patients can infect others. We must note that older people and people with medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease) may be more vulnerable to becoming very ill.

Please remember that you can avoid the virus and prevent it from reaching others by first washing your hands frequently with soap and water correctly, and keep a sanitizer close so you can use it when necessary. Remain at least 1.5 meters away from the person close to you, even farther if the person seems to be unwell, and the best of all is to stay home and not be out for longer periods. Please do not touch your mouth, eyes or nose and even your ears until after you wash your hands.

It is very important to remember that it is not exactly known how long the virus stays viable outside the body, though specialists say it may survive for hours or up to several days. We must not get bored with the daily routine to stay healthy and keep those around us healthy. There will be a day when the coronavirus will be no more, so let us prepare to celebrate that day without having regrets or bad memories. Let us be among those who say "we did", not "if we had done".

A final word: "Many of life's failure are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up." —Thomas Edison



Local

# Kuwait FM chairs meeting of committee charged with citizens' repatriation

Foreign minister discusses COVID-19 with Tunisian, Jordanian counterparts



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah chairs a meeting of a committee charged with the implementation of a plan to repatriate Kuwaiti citizens. — KUNA

Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah chairs a meeting for the ministry's emergency committee.

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah chaired Tuesday a meeting of a committee charged with the implementation of a plan to repatriate Kuwaiti citizens, due to begin on April 19. The committee members discussed completion of measures among relevant state departments to bring back Kuwaiti nationals. The meeting was attended by Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah, President of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Sabah, chairman of Kuwait Airways Yusuf Al-Jassem and foreign ministry officials. Sheikh Dr Ahmad had earlier chaired a meeting for the ministry's emergency committee, in presence of Jarallah and senior ministry officials, to discuss the

developments connected with the coronavirus and the upcoming measure to repatriate Kuwaitis abroad. Meanwhile, Sheikh Dr Ahmad received a phone call from his Tunisian counterpart Nouredine Erray, discussing with him issues connected with bilateral ties. The two officials also touched on the latest developments concerning the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Sheikh Dr Ahmad also received a telephone call from his Jordanian counterpart Ayman Al-Safadi, discussing the close bilateral relations and means of boosting cooperation against spread of the novel coronavirus. In other news, Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah received, Tuesday, the charge d'affaires of the Saudi embassy Dr

Hassan Al-Ansari who handed a written letter from King Salman bin Abdulaziz to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In the letter, the Saudi King touched on issues of bilateral relations and recent regional and international developments. The ceremony to hand the letter was attended by Ambassador Ayham Al-Omar, head of the Deputy Foreign Minister's office. Separately, Kuwait's Directorate General for the Civil Aviation announced that two Turkish Airways and Qatar Airways took off from the Kuwait International Airport on Tuesday, heading to Istanbul and Doha carrying expatriates. The two flights are part of the DGCA plan to facilitate travel of expatriates who are willing to leave Kuwait, the directorate said in a press statement. — KUNA



Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah meets with the charge d'affaires of the Saudi embassy Dr Hassan Al-Ansari.



KUWAIT: Kuwait National Guard set up a field hospital in Mahboula to start receiving area residents for novel coronavirus (COVID-19) tests. The area has been put under total lockdown along with Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh as part of efforts to curb the spread of the disease. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

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Unrest fears rise as Lagos extends COVID lockdown

## Firm offers spouses apartments to avoid 'coronavirus divorce'



JAKARTA: Family members of a victim of the COVID-19 coronavirus walk past burial sites at a cemetery in Jakarta yesterday. — AFP

# Virus 'tracing' by smartphone

## Researchers ramp up research on potential solution

WASHINGTON: Can an app contain the pandemic? Interest is growing in smartphone technology as a potential key to ending lockdowns and reopening economies around the world. Digital "contact tracing" would allow mobile systems to log instances where people have been in proximity with an infected person and send alerts where appropriate. Researchers and health agencies around the world have been ramping up research on the potential solution, which could get a boost from a joint initiative by Google and Apple to make tracing more effective. Here are some answers to the most common questions about tracing:

### What is contact tracing?

Under the smartphone version of contact tracing, people would download mobile apps and update their COVID-19 status should they come down with the virus. The apps would use a phone's Bluetooth wireless signals to determine if a given user had crossed paths with an infected person. A number of research teams have been developing such systems, and at least one

has been used in Singapore.

This could lead to "alerts" sent to anyone in close contact with a person who is infected, or who later confirms an infection, and allow those people at risk to self-quarantine. The Apple-Google collaboration could make this easier by allowing apps to cross over the two dominant mobile systems. The companies said that their technology could enable an app's "digital key" to monitor contacts for a 14-day period.

A smartphone system could effectively replace the lengthy "manual" tracing by interview currently handled by medical staff, said Francesco Benedetti, a research scientist on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology team working with more than 30 governments and health agencies on contact tracing. "Doctors waste a lot of time in these

interviews," Benedetti said. A digital system is more efficient because "it doesn't rely on people's memory, and it can determine contacts with people who don't know each other."

### How does this help?

Researchers say digital tracing can be effective - but only if significant numbers of people download the app and report symptoms. Such a system "can achieve epidemic control if used by enough people," Oxford University researchers wrote in Science Magazine.

Efforts are underway to study or implement contact tracing in France, Germany, Britain and elsewhere.

In the United States, presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden cited contact tracing as part of a plan "to safely reopen America" along with ex-

panded testing and other steps. Benedetti said a functioning tracing system "can help decision makers determine what is safe to open." Over time, the system can generate "heat maps" and gather data on how the virus is transmitted, enabling "a more selective quarantine" that does not require everyone to remain in place.

### What are the limitations?

A major limitation is that any contact tracing plan must reach a critical mass: People need to download an app and update their status. Some experts suggest 60 percent adoption could help turn the tide of the pandemic, said Tina White, a researcher and co-founder of the volunteer group Covid Watch which is developing an app and is working with Oxford University scientists. "A lot depends on messaging and how it is presented," White said. "If people understand this is something that protects them, they will use it." Benedetti said a tracing app could still have a "high impact" with 40 percent adoption, but that effectiveness would depend on other safety measures implemented. —AFP



## A key to reopening the society?

## Obama endorses Biden for president

WASHINGTON: Barack Obama endorsed Joe Biden's White House bid on Tuesday, saying his longtime vice president can unify and "heal" a nation struggling through some of its darkest moments. The formal backing by perhaps the most popular politician in America is the latest boost for Biden's surging candidacy, and a further sign that Democratic leaders are rallying around the party flagbearer more than six months before November's election. "Joe has the character and the experience to guide us through one of our darkest times and heal us through a long recovery," Obama said in a 12-minute video. "I believe Joe has all the qualities we need in a president right now."

The cherished endorsement comes at a time of deep national anxiety, with the vast majority of Americans under stay-at-home orders due to the coronavirus pandemic

that has killed nearly 25,000 people in the United States. With President Donald Trump's handling of the outbreak under the spotlight, Obama signalled he believed Biden-with four decades of government experience-would be a far more capable manager of the US response.

"Joe helped me manage H1N1 (influenza) and prevent the Ebola epidemic from becoming the type of pandemic we're seeing now," Obama said. Biden, 77, promptly expressed his thanks in a tweet. "Barack-This endorsement means the world to Jill and me," the Democratic stalwart said. "We're going to build on the progress we made together, and there's no one I'd rather have standing by my side."

Biden is the Democratic Party's presumptive nominee to challenge Trump, after his lone remaining opponent Bernie Sanders dropped out of the race last week. The leftist US senator from Vermont endorsed his ex-rival Monday, saying it was time for Americans to "come together" behind Biden. Two-term president Obama also praised Sanders as a progressive champion whose energy and enthusiasm inspired young voters by the millions. — AFP



WASHINGTON: In this file photo, US Vice President Joe Biden wipes away tears as he walks past President Barack Obama after he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. — AFP

## Row in Gaza over arrests for Zoom chat

GAZA: A fierce dispute has divided the Palestinian community after Gaza's rulers, Hamas, arrested six local activists for chatting by video conference with left-leaning campaigners in Israel. Islamist group Hamas bans all communications with Israel and last week arrested the six members of the Gaza Youth Committee on charges of "treason" and "normalization" of relations with the Jewish state.

The arrests have sparked a fierce free-speech row that has drawn in a former Gaza-based contractor with human rights group Amnesty International who had criticized the activists online. In the two-hour call via video conference service Zoom - the latest in a format they have called "Skype with your enemy" - the participants had discussed their daily lives and expressed hopes for better leadership for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Rami Aman, 36, the founder of the Gaza Youth Committee, and the five others were detained, accused of "treason", after speaking to the dozens of Israeli activists online. Gaza's Hamas-run interior ministry said that "establishing any activity or communication with the Israeli occupation under any excuse is a crime punishable by law, and is treason against our people". Hamas, which is considered a terrorist group by Israel and most Western states, seized control of Gaza in a 2007 near civil war. Since then the Jewish state has fought three devastating wars in Gaza while maintaining a crippling blockade on the coastal strip, arguing it must isolate Hamas.

### 'Not a mistake'

A key player in the row has been the former Amnesty activist Hind Khoudary, who on Facebook criticized Aman over the al-



RAFAH: A full moon is pictured in the sky over Rafah town in the southern Gaza Strip. —AFP

leged act of "normalization" with Israel. Khoudary tagged several Hamas officials in the online post, ensuring Aman's Zoom call would come to their attention. Gaza's interior ministry has however denied that Khoudary's posts tipped them off to the video call.

"It is not true what was published, saying citizens or journalists publishing posts on Facebook and social media were responsible for the arrests," ministry spokesman Iyad al-Bozm said. "Rami Aman and his group are under surveillance all the time by the security services." Unfortunately, Rami tried to carry out activities that violate the law and the culture and customs of our people."

Khoudary told AFP she did not regret her posts and did not oppose Aman's arrest, while stressing that she was not responsible for his detention. "I didn't make a mistake," she said, criticizing him over what she described as his attempt to speak on behalf of all Palestinians. "As a Palestinian, before I became a journalist, I am against normalization," said Khoudary. Amnesty confirmed that Khoudary had been a "short-term free-

lance contract worker" who helped document protests in Gaza last year, but said she no longer works for the organization.

"We absolutely condemn arrests of individuals because of practicing their right to peaceful expression and assembly," said Saleh Hijazi, Amnesty's deputy director for the Middle East. Former Human Rights Watch official Peter Bouckaert removed Khoudary from an online group and told her she should be "ashamed" of herself. UN Watch, a Geneva-based organization originally set up to confront alleged anti-Semitism at the United Nations, however praised Aman as a "courageous Gaza peace activist".

Khoudary herself was detained by Hamas last year for posts supporting Gaza street protests. Aman was briefly detained two years ago on similar charges. Debate has flared on social networks, with some Palestinians condemning the latest arrests and others congratulating Khoudary for working against normalization. Collaborating or even communicating with Israelis is controversial among Palestinians, with many seeing such dialogue as a waste of time. — AFP



## International

# COVID-19 hits 'like a bomb' as toll rises in Ecuador's business capital

## 'There is no space for either the living or the dead'

**GUAYAQUIL:** Ecuador's economic capital Guayaquil is reeling from the most aggressive outbreak of COVID-19 in Latin America after the pandemic hit the city "like a bomb," its mayor said. Cynthia Viteri has emerged from her own bout with the virus to battle the worst crisis the port city of nearly 3 million people has known in modern times.

"There is no space for either the living or the dead. That's how severe the pandemic is in Guayaquil," Viteri told AFP in a phone interview Monday.

Mortuaries, funeral homes and hospital services are overwhelmed, and Viteri said the actual death toll from the virus is likely much higher than the official national figure of 369. Guayaquil accounts for more than 70 percent of Ecuador's 7,600 infections since February 29.



### Guayaquil reeling from aggressive outbreak

there were no controls like they should have been if we had known that this was already coming by air. And the city of Guayaquil simply convulsed."

Too late, the city went into lockdown as authorities imposed a 15-hour curfew and bodies began to accumulate in homes, and even on the streets. "The health system was obviously overwhelmed, the morgues overflowed, the funeral homes overflowed," Guayaquil's authorities "are not the villains of the world," Viteri insisted. "We are the victims of a virus that came by air" that she said echoed the yellow fever that devastated the city when it came over the sea from Panama in 1842. "A bomb exploded here. Other places received only the shock waves. But the crater remained here in Guayaquil."

#### Counting the dead

Viteri said the number of coronavirus deaths in the city is likely far higher than the official figure "for a single reason—because there are no tests to determine how many people are actually infected in the city and in the country." She continued: "Patients are dying without ever having had a test. And there is no space, time or resources to be able to carry out subsequent examinations and to know whether or not they died from the coronavirus."

"In the month of March alone, there were 1,500 more deaths than in the month of March last year. "The true number will be known once this tragedy, this nightmare, ends." People are continuing to "collapse in their houses, in the hospitals, all over the place," she said, because the normal medical services are overwhelmed. "There are still women who need



**GUAYAQUIL:** A pick-up truck carries coffins as it drives past the IESS Hospital Los Ceibos in Guayaquil, Ecuador during the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

to give birth, people are still being run over, people still have diabetes and hypertension."

She said just last month alone "100 people" had died because they were unable to get dialysis treatment. "Why? Because there is no space. Because we are stretched to breaking point, our doctors have fallen sick too." Around 50 people from her own municipal staff had died, she said. Viteri said her task now was to bring all the city's financial resources to bear on buying test kits, with \$12 million already earmarked, to be able to detect, isolate and

monitor positive cases.

"For me there is no other way," she said. "We have to look after the living, and provide a decent burial for the dead. We are living in a war. Responding to a spate of nightmarish media stories about bodies accumulating in hospitals, homes and streets, the city was making two new cemeteries available to bury the dead and relieve pressure on city morgues. "The bodies are being collected daily," Viteri said. "But this is very hard because it means there is mourning every day in Guayaquil." — AFP

## A long Texas road trip for 525,000 masks

**HOUSTON:** All it took was one little call to spur Tom Banning into action, undertaking a giant mission across a very large state - distributing 525,000 masks to health care providers around Texas, a sprawling landmass roughly the size of France. In mid-March, amid the emerging US coronavirus outbreak, the doctor was contacted by a golf buddy who had come into possession of hundreds of thousands of professional-grade masks from Mexico and wondered whether Banning knew anyone who might be in need. "The whole state is looking for this PPE!" Banning said, using the acronym for personal protective equipment - vital everyday items such as masks and gowns that health care professionals depend on to protect themselves.

Banning, who is also CEO of the Texas Academy of Family Physicians, had an address book brimming with doctors about to close their clinics for lack of such items. The next day, Banning went to examine the precious



**This US Navy handout photo shows US Navy Chief Personnel Specialist Erica Campos, from Houston, assigned to Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Kidd (DDG 100) sewing fabric to make cloth face masks for the crew. — AFP**

cargo - lo and behold a moving van filled with 350 boxes, each containing 1,500 high-quality masks similar to the N-95 masks recommended by American health authorities. Thus began the equipment's odyssey to a constellation of far-flung Texas cities, from San Antonio to Dallas, with a number of rural hospitals in between - and all in one day. "I got

on the phone and immediately started calling some practices that I knew were seeing high volumes of potentially COVID-19 patients," Banning said. Jumping in his car, with his 12-year-old son along for the ride, Banning headed to Houston, in east Texas, to drop off a shipment to the team of caregivers tending to the city's first declared cases. — AFP

## Heartbreak, fear for staff on the frontline

**ROME:** Doctors, nurses and healthcare workers have become the unwitting heroes of the coronavirus pandemic, winning applause from balconies and streets around the world. From Yaounde to Rome to New York, the pandemic has infected more than 1.9 million people and claimed 118,000 lives. Hospital workers are dealing with a huge influx of patients, while also facing a lack of equipment in many cases and the fear of becoming infected themselves. Often, they face heartbreaking decisions while treating their patients. AFP journalists spoke to healthcare workers around the world to find out what it's really like to be on the frontline in the coronavirus pandemic.

#### Italy: 'We can't get sick'

In Italy, one of the worst affected countries, dozens of doctors and nurses have died from COVID-19 and thousands of healthcare workers have become infected. Silvana de Florio, nursing coordinator in the COVID-19 intensive care unit of the Tor Vergata Hospital in Rome, underlined the importance of being appropriately killed out with masks, visors, gloves, scrubs and suits to avoid contagion.

"We don't set aside a specific amount of time for it, but we have estimated that for a seven-hour shift, about 40-50 minutes is spent just on getting dressed," she said. "In terms of hand washing and hand decontamination, we are talking about 60-75 minutes per day," she said after scolding a care worker for not wearing a mask. "Medical staff can't get sick-not so much because of

their ability to work, but because it would not be fair."

#### Ecuador: The morgues are full

In the Pacific port city of Guayaquil in Ecuador, a sick nurse makes no attempt to hide her anger: 80 of her colleagues have been infected and five have already died. Ecuador is one of the worst affected countries in South America, with hundreds of dead bodies lying inside homes because the morgues are full. "We went to war without any weapons," said the 55-year-old nurse, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"The necessary equipment was not ready when this (the pandemic) was already happening, devastating Europe," said the nurse, who is resting at home as there is no space in the hospitals. Patients with "severe symptoms" were arriving at her emergency department, "but due to a lack of tests, they were treated as if they had the flu and sent home." "We had no personal protective equipment (PPE) but we could not refuse to treat the patients," she said.

#### US: Lack of equipment

In the United States, Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez, president of the New York State Nurses Association, also complained about the lack of protective gear for medical workers. "We don't have the arms and the armour to protect ourselves against the enemy," she said at a recent protest outside a hospital. Benny Mathew, a 43-year-old nurse in New York, said he caught the virus after caring for at least four patients without adequate medical dress. Not long afterwards, when his fever had subsided, the hospital asked him to come back to work.

"They told me if you don't have fever you can come on work—that was their only criteria," he said. "I was told to wear a mask and come to work. We don't have enough staff so I think it was my duty to come back. "But I was worried that I was going to trans-

mit the disease to my coworkers, to the patients who don't already have it," he added. With more than 195,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and around 10,000 deaths, New York state is the epicenter of the pandemic in the US, the worst affected country so far.

#### Philippines: Doctors playing God

The doctors at Manila's San Lazaro hospital, a specialist centre for infectious diseases, are used to battling humanity's nastiest contagions—but they've never seen anything like COVID-19. Suspected coronavirus cases have died at triage, terrified patients grow outraged when they can't get tested immediately and the doctors have to manage the anxiety they could be carriers too. "It's a living nightmare," said doctor Ferdinand de Guzman, who at 60 years old is himself in a high-risk group. With a limited number of intensive care rooms and ventilators, the doctors are burdened with horrific judgments. "We don't like to play God," de Guzman said. "Clinicians just have to make decisions." Many are afraid to go home after work. "We are worried about our families," de Guzman said. "We always reserve one or two beds for (hospital) employees. We never had this problem before, ever."

#### Cameroon: 'We are afraid'

Roger Etoa, a doctor in Cameroon, one of the worst-affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, admits that fear of catching the disease also affects healthcare workers. "I live with my wife and children," the 36-year-old said. "When I arrive in the evening I rush to the shower, but it is difficult to stop the children from jumping on you." Etoa is the director of a healthcare centre in Douala, the capital of Cameroon. As a precaution, he's started taking chloroquine, a drug used to treat malaria. "We don't yet know if it works preventively or even curatively, but I prefer (to take it) just in case," he said.

## COVID-19 or not, Marines need their buzz cuts

**WASHINGTON:** While coronavirus sequestering has millions sporting longer locks as they go without haircuts, that's not going to happen for one group: the US Marines. From their boot camp buzz cuts to the "high and tight" style standard for the Marine Corps, a spartan trim is inseparable from their war-fighting discipline, Pentagon Joint Chiefs Chairman General Mark Milley said Tuesday.

Milley was asked whether social distancing practices, which have prevented many worldwide from keeping their barber appointments, should be implemented in the US military, after a video surfaced of about two dozen of Marines lined up for their regular cut at Camp Pendleton in California. While most were keeping their distance, it was not the recommended six feet, and none had masks on, the video showed. "Whether they are marines, or sol-

diers, or airmen, or sailors, you know discipline is a fundamental function of our force," Milley told reporters. "And for many, many years the United States military has had hair standards... Yes, I think Marines should get haircuts." Milley cited the legendary US Marines' assault on the Japanese-held island of Iwo Jima during World War II in early 1945. "That Marine victory was the result of incredible discipline," he said. "It may seem superficial to some, but getting a haircut is part of that discipline."

Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who is already dealing with nearly 600 COVID-19 infections aboard an aircraft carrier and 4,769 cases in total across some 150 military installations, said it was one of myriad issues as they try to both protect the US forces and maintain battle readiness. "There's no doubt in my mind that you could go to any camp, fort, base, you name it and find somebody not following the guidance," he said. "That's something I would not have thought of putting into the guidance, the haircut policy," he added. To which Milley jumped in: "Don't take that as guidance yet. (There are) a lot of ways to do haircuts." — AFP



**BIREUEN, Indonesia:** Indonesian doctors wearing protective gear hold newborn babies wearing face shields as protective measures amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic at a clinic in Bireuen, Aceh province. — AFP

Early studies have shown that chloroquine, may be effective in the treatment and prevention of COVID-19, though more evidence is needed. "We are afraid, like the rest of the population. Afraid that our masks or suits are not fitted properly when we are dealing with a patient who is showing symptoms," the doctor said. "We're obviously afraid of catching it. When you get up in the morning and you have a bit of a headache, you ask yourself, 'What if this is it? What if it's our turn to get the virus?'"

#### Spain: Patients left alone

Antonio Alvarez, a nurse in the intensive care unit at Vall d'Hebron, the biggest hospital in Barcelona, described the heartbreaking daily task of phoning a family member to say goodbye to their loved ones from behind the protective glass. "It's difficult to see patients who are alone and have no family with them," the 33-year-old said. "They're saying goodbye from the door and

it's probably the last time they'll see them" since funeral ceremonies have been banned, he said. "If it was a member of my family, I wouldn't be able to stand just sitting there and seeing them behind the door," Alvarez said. "It's a very difficult situation."

"Everyone is working like crazy, as though it was a war," said Nuri Aydin, director of the Cerrahpasa Faculty of Medicine at Istanbul University. "The atmosphere here is not like a normal workplace, but a battlefield," he said during a visit to the hospital. Istanbul, a metropolis with some 15 million residents and Turkey's economic capital, has around 60 percent of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the country. Many healthcare workers are sleeping in hotels or converted student dormitories, afraid of infecting their families. "What they are doing is superhuman. There's no price for the work of healthcare workers, they're in the service of humanity," Aydin said. — AFP



## International

# Anger in Africa over coronavirus 'stigma' in China amid concerns

## Controversy coincides with a Chinese charm offensive in Africa

**ABUJA:** African countries are seething over accounts that Africans are battling stigma and discrimination in China over the coronavirus pandemic, apparently linked to a cluster of cases in the Nigerian community in the southern city of Guangzhou. The African residents say they have suffered forced evictions, arbitrary quarantines and mass coronavirus tests and face discrimination in restaurants and hotels.

"We saw images of Nigerians in the streets with their possessions and this was of course extremely distressing for us at home," Nigerian Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama told Chinese ambassador Zhou Pingjian on Tuesday. He said the situation was "unacceptable" to Nigeria's government and people, and demanded "immediate action" from the Chinese authorities. The African Union on Saturday expressed its "extreme concern" about the situation in Guangzhou and called on Beijing to take immediate corrective measures.

The controversy coincides with a Chinese charm offensive in Africa. Diplomats said around 20 African countries are drawing up a joint letter to Beijing to say that mass virus tests and quarantines imposed specifically on Africans amount to "racism". The draft letter, a form of diplomatic correspondence called a note verbale, describes this as a "clear violation of human rights", the sources say.

### Racism issue

Local authorities in Guangzhou, a city of 15 million, said at least eight people diagnosed with coronavirus had spent time in the city's Yuexiu

district, known as "Little Africa". Five were Nigerian nationals who sparked widespread anger after reports surfaced that they had broken a mandatory quarantine and been to eight restaurants and other public places instead of staying home.

Several Africans told AFP they had been forcibly evicted from their homes and turned away by hotels. One said he had been sleeping under a bridge for four days and could not find a store that would allow him to buy food. On Sunday, as international pressure mounted, the foreign ministry in Beijing issued a statement saying the country attached "great importance to the life and health of foreign nationals" and rejected all "racist and discriminatory" remarks. The US fast-food chain McDonald's apologized after a sign in one of its restaurants in Guangzhou told black people they were banned from entering.

### AU expresses its extreme concern



### Embarrassment

The global pandemic was caused by a novel form of coronavirus that scientists say leapt the species barrier to humans through a live animal market in the Chinese city of Wuhan. China has reacted furiously to any references that it says could spur xenophobia because of the virus's origins. The US assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Tibor Nagy, tweeted that the reports from Guangzhou "are appalling", adding: "Abuse and xenophobia has no place in our fight against this global pandemic. Chinese authorities must do more to stop these attacks against Africans living and working in China."

In response, Chinese foreign ministry



**GUANGZHOU:** File photo shows people gathering on a street in the 'Little Africa' district in Guangzhou, the capital of southern China's Guangdong province. —AFP

spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters in Beijing that Washington "has taken advantage of this issue to try and drive a wedge between China and African countries." He said the "friendship between China and Africa is deeply rooted... and it is unbreakable." In the context of Africa, the affair is diplomatically embarrassing for China, as it has sent doctors, medical equipment and other help to impoverished countries in Africa imperilled by the virus.

The hugely appreciated gestures include a team of 15 doctors who arrived in Abuja last week aboard a plane filled with anti-coronavirus gear including a consignment of 50,000 masks and 11,000 rubber gloves that landed Tuesday morning in South Africa, the continent's worst-hit country. The United States in recent years has seen its clout in Africa wane as China has thrown open the credit spigot, providing billions in loans for Chinese-made infrastructure projects. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Policeman killed in Cairo

**CAIRO:** An Egyptian policeman was killed and three others wounded in a shootout Tuesday with armed militants in Cairo, the interior ministry said in a statement. A "terrorist cell" was intending to attack Christians in southern and eastern Cairo during their Easter celebrations, the statement said. Coptic Orthodox Christians, who make up around 10-15 percent of Egypt's 100 million population, celebrate Orthodox Easter on 19 April. The ministry said the cell was "neutralized" with seven militants killed. Six rifles and a cache of ammunition were recovered from the scene and other weapons that were "to be used in their terror plan" were found in a nearby warehouse. Private television channel CBC Extra News showed footage of the gunfire, as residents of Al-Amiriyah suburb were warned to stay inside their homes away from windows and doors. —AFP

#### Virus hits Jewish community

**RABAT:** Morocco's small Jewish community has been hit hard by the coronavirus, losing 12 of its members after a wedding and a religious ceremony last month - 10 percent of the kingdom's total deaths. In early March, days before the country announced a lockdown to stem the spread of the virus, members of the community attended a wedding in the coastal city of Agadir, "along with guests from abroad", said community leader Serge Berdugo. "A few days later, they met again to celebrate the festival of Purim in Casablanca, and it was a tragedy," he said. The 12 who died included an 83-year-old rabbi, Shalom Edelman, and three relatives of the head of Israel's Labor party, Amir Peretz. Peretz confirmed their deaths on his Facebook page and wrote that the pandemic had prevented him from visiting Morocco to attend their funerals. —AFP

#### Trump halts WHO funding

**WASHINGTON:** President Donald Trump announced Tuesday that swaths of the United States could lift coronavirus shutdowns "very soon" and made peace with state governors after being accused of acting like a king. While defusing an extraordinary domestic row, Trump however opened a new front on the international stage when he announced a freeze in US funding to the World Health Organization because he said it had been biased to China. According to Trump, the WHO prevented transparency over the COVID-19 outbreak when it appeared in China, costing other countries crucial time to prepare, delaying decisions to stop international travel. "Had the WHO done its job to get medical experts into China to objectively assess the situation on the ground and to call out China's lack of transparency, the outbreak could have been contained at its source with very little death," he said. —AFP

#### Vietnam 'fake news' fines

**HANOI:** A new decree took effect in Vietnam yesterday introducing fines for the dissemination of 'fake news' or rumors on social media, amid the rapid spread of comment online about the novel coronavirus in the Southeast Asian country. The first COVID-19 cases were detected in Vietnam this January and the health ministry has reported 267 infections so far with no deaths, numbers well below those seen in some other Asian countries. Local authorities have already fined hundreds of people for posting what they described as "fake news" about the virus, using the term popularized by US President Donald Trump, based on existing legal provisions. —Reuters

## 'Starve or get sick': Africa's COVID-19 lockdown dilemma

**NAIROBI:** Women and children fell to the ground, bloodied and trampled in a desperate surge for food being handed out in a Nairobi slum, as police fired teargas and men with sticks beat the hungry. As African countries grapple with the coronavirus pandemic, observers warn that the traumatic scenes which played out last Friday will not be the last if governments fail to help millions of urban poor who live hand-to-mouth.

"I give them (the government) one to two weeks before things get worse. Not in terms of coronavirus, but in terms of hunger," said Kennedy Odede, who runs Shining Hope For Communities (SHOFCO), a grassroots movement which works in the Nairobi slum Kibera and other informal settlements in Kenya. "If it continues like this, we might be playing with fire." Kenya has so far cordoned off the capital and parts of its coastline and imposed a night-time curfew and other social distancing measures.

Many of these restrictions are having a wrenching impact, causing loss of jobs among the poor, said Odede. While President Uhuru Kenyatta has wielded the threat of a full lockdown to get citizens to comply with the rules, officials admit it is an agonizing choice, especially as 60 percent of Nairobi's

## Unrest fears rise as Lagos extends COVID lockdown

**LAGOS:** Bus driver Christian did not sleep at all last night after Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari ordered an extension to the lockdown in his sprawling home city Lagos to halt the coronavirus. A few hours before the announcement on Monday evening, word spread that over a hundred youths from a criminal gang were swarming through his neighborhood of Alimosho on a robbing spree. "Everybody was scattering for their lives. We ran away and I locked myself inside the house," he told AFP, refusing to give his surname.

"When it was calmer, with the men on my street, we organized ourselves. We didn't sleep all night. We prepared weapons, collected knives, what we could find." The authorities insist that extending the shutdown in Africa's biggest city to one month is vital to stop a virus that has so far caused 343 confirmed infections and 10 deaths in Nigeria. But residents in the usually

## Firm offers spouses apartments to avoid 'coronavirus divorce'

**TOKYO:** Worried about a "coronavirus divorce"? An enterprising Japanese short-term rental firm is marketing its empty apartments as a way for stressed couples to get some time apart during the virus lockdown. "Please consult with us before thinking about 'coronavirus divorce'," the Tokyo-based Kasoku urges customers, offering its Airbnb-

residents live in slums. "Locking up people in the slums will be the last option. A lot needs to be done before that," a high-ranking security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

### 'Unenforceable and unsustainable'

The coronavirus arrived late in Africa, but is slowly taking hold with over 15,000 cases and 800 deaths across the continent. While much of the developed world waited weeks to begin taking action, countries in Africa rapidly shut borders and banned mass gatherings. Mauritius, Rwanda and Tunisia were the first to impose full lockdowns—with Mauritius going so far as to shut supermarkets and bakeries for 10 days.

South Africa is the biggest economy on the continent to completely confine its citizens, while Nigeria imposed lockdowns on Lagos—the continent's largest city—and its capital Abuja, which on Monday were extended for another two weeks. Both have millions of people packed tightly in urban slums.

"The inevitable reaction has been to follow what the rest of the world is doing," said Jakkie Cilliers at the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies (ISS), who has called for Africans to come up with a "unique solution" to stave off the virus. "A lockdown is unenforceable and unsustainable across much of Africa. You are trying to do something that is not possible and you are condemning people to a choice between starving and getting sick. "It's not possible for 10 people living in a tin shack... to not go outside for three weeks."

frenetic economic hub of 20 million, where more than half rely on daily earnings to survive, complain they have been left facing crippling economic hardship and rising crime.

### 'I was so scared'

In recent days, inhabitants in a string of districts across Lagos and neighboring Ogun state have reported a surge in gang attacks. "The criminals have been taking undue advantage of the lockdown to dispossess people of their valuables," community leader Mufu Gbadamosi said. He has organized people in his Agbado area of Lagos into groups to man checkpoints and screen people coming into their neighborhood after dark. "We shall continue to hold the night vigil until the end of the restriction," he told. Local resident Dotun Alabi said it was the hunger and desperation caused by the lockdown that appeared to be pushing people into crime.

"When we arrested two boys, they told us that they took to robbery in order to find something to eat," he said. Inhabitants in the overcrowded neighborhoods of Lagos' poor—where millions live squeezed together—are no strangers to gang violence as criminals frequently fight for upper hand. But Chioma Okoro, who has bunkered down in her home in the Agege district,

like fully-furnished units as "temporary shelters" for people to escape the family, whether to work or just get some peace and quiet.

Japan's government has declared a state of emergency in seven regions over the virus outbreak. While the measures do not include prohibitions on going out, people have been asked to avoid unnecessary outings, schools are closed and many people are working from home. For those finding that arrangement onerous, Kasoku is offering apartments priced at 4,400 yen (\$40) a day.

Spokesman Kosuke Amano told AFP the company has had 20 customers since it began the campaign on April 3. The service also comes with the offer of a free 30-minute divorce consultation with



**NAIROBI:** Christian Winnie Njenga (left) pray with her sons at home as they follow the live broadcasting of a service on television from the All Saints' Cathedral in Nairobi, Kenya. —AFP

### 'Make ends meet'

In sub-Saharan Africa, Liberia and Zimbabwe have also imposed full lockdowns. However most nations across the continent have stopped short of forcing all of their citizens to stay indoors. Madagascar and Ghana have completely locked down selected regions and towns, while Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Niger have imposed states of emergency and night-time curfews. Like Kenya, Benin has cordoned off key cities—preventing movement in and out—while the capitals of Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Niger are also cut off. Ethiopia, with a population of over 100 million, has closed borders and schools and discouraged large gatherings, but has yet to restrict citizens' movement. —AFP



**LAGOS:** A man searches in a bag for his clearance document at the main gate to Omole Estate, whose occupants were attacked by armed bandits capitalizing on the lockdown in Lagos. —AFP

said insecurity had grown in the past two weeks and ratcheted up dramatically over the weekend.

"Now it's three times, 10 times worse," she said. She had tried to go out with her husband to get supplies but dashed back when she saw a group of young men brandishing iron bars, machetes, and homemade firearms. "I was hearing gunshots yesterday evening, I was so scared," she said. —AFP

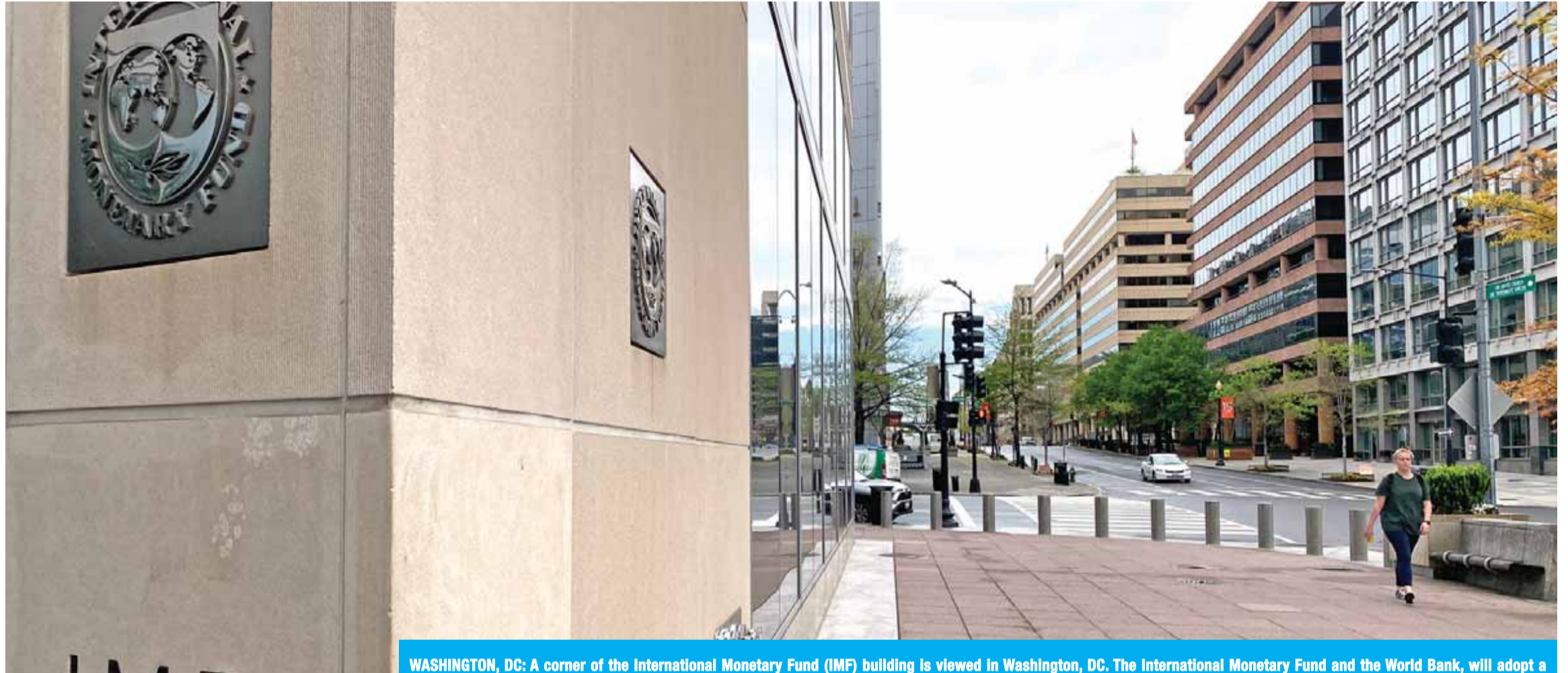
a legal official. "Among the users of this service are a wife who said she fled after having a big fight with her husband, and a woman who said she wants time to herself as she is tired of taking care of her children who are at home all day because of school closures, while her husband works remotely at home," Amano said.

"We don't have solid data showing divorce is on the rise, but media reports that divorce rates are rising in China and in Russia after lockdowns there led us to come up with this service," he added. While the firm is marketing the apartments in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, the service has also attracted users facing serious problems, including a woman fleeing domestic violence. —AFP



## Business

THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2020

**10** Chinese economy contracts for first time in decades: Survey**11** Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait holds AGM**11** Oil in the age of coronavirus and a US shale bust

WASHINGTON, DC: A corner of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) building is viewed in Washington, DC. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, will adopt a "virtual format" for their spring meetings instead of convening in person in Washington, DC. — AFP

# Mideast economy set for deep slump: IMF

## Pandemic causing severe global recession, it could get worse

DUBAI: The Middle East and North Africa economy will contract by 3.3 percent this year, the biggest slump in four decades, hammered by the coronavirus and low oil prices, the IMF said Tuesday.

In its World Economic Outlook, the International Monetary Fund said the damage would be much worse than the region's last major shock, the 2008-09 global financial crisis, when it managed to post modest growth. The region, which includes all Arab countries and Iran, will suffer its worst economic performance since 1978 when it was convulsed with unrest and shrank by 4.7 percent, according to World Bank data. The IMF said that all the Arab countries apart from Egypt will see their gross domestic product (GDP) fall this year.

Saudi Arabia, the region's heavyweight which is just emerging from an oil price war with Russia that saw crude prices crash, is headed for a 2.3 percent contraction.

"The fast deterioration of the global economic outlook as the epidemic has spread and the breakdown of the OPEC+ agreement among oil suppliers have weighed heavily on commodity prices," the global lender said. Its report was prepared before the OPEC+ grouping—which takes in OPEC producers and allies—reached agreement on Sunday to cut output by nearly 10 million barrels per day, the largest in history.

From mid-January to end-March, oil prices dropped by 65 percent or \$40 a barrel and natural gas prices declined by 38 percent, the IMF said. It also projected prices to remain below \$45 a barrel through 2023, around 25 percent below the average last year.

### 'Extreme uncertainty'

Arab countries, which have reported more than 20,000 coronavirus cases along with over 700 deaths, have resorted to sweeping lockdowns and curfews to pre-



**MENA economy will contract by 3.3% this year**

vent the spread of the disease, disrupting local economies. Years of bloody conflicts in several Arab countries including Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya have already battered their economies and created widespread poverty.

And many Middle Eastern countries, notably the Gulf states plus Iraq and Iran, depend heavily on oil revenues to finance their budgets. "These developments are expected to weigh heavily on oil exporters with undiversified revenues and exports," said the IMF, adding that lower oil prices will meanwhile benefit oil-importing nations.

The IMF said that the latest oil output cut will further dampen the prospects of the Saudi economy, which grew by just 0.3 percent in 2019. The United Arab Emirates' economy, the most diversified in the region, is projected to contract by 3.5 percent, while Qatar, the third-largest in the Gulf, is expected to slide 4.3 percent. Iran's economy, the second largest in the Middle East, is forecast to shrink 6.0 percent in 2020 for its third contraction in a row. In 2018 and 2019, it shrank by 3.6 percent and 7.6 percent respectively.

Iran has been hit hard by the coronavirus, reporting more than 73,000 cases and 4,585 deaths.

The economy of Lebanon, which has defaulted on its mountain of debt, is expected to contract by a massive 12 percent, while Iraq, OPEC's second-largest producer, is

headed for a fall of 4.7 percent. Only Egypt is projected to stay in positive territory with 2.0 percent growth although that is way down from the 6.0 percent projected before the coronavirus crisis hit.

As a whole, the Middle East and North Africa economy, which grew by just 1.0 percent last year, is projected to rebound by 4.2 percent in 2021, the report said. But the IMF noted that "extreme uncertainty" surrounds its forecast because the economic fallout of the pandemic depends on factors that are hard to predict—including the pathways of the disease and the intensity of containment efforts.

### Deep recession

The coronavirus pandemic is pushing the global economy into its deepest recession in a century, cutting world output by three percent this year, and the crisis could get worse, the International Monetary Fund said Tuesday. The downturn will slash \$9 trillion from the world economy, IMF chief economist Gita Gopinath told reporters as she presented the latest forecasts in the World Economic Outlook. If the virus is contained and economies can begin operating again, 2021 should see a rebound of 5.8 percent, according to the IMF. But the authors acknowledged the difficulty in making an accurate forecast amid the rapidly changing situation.

With much of the global economy shut down amid efforts to contain the virus and keep health systems from collapsing, the IMF warned that there are "severe risks of a worse outcome" due to the "extreme uncertainty around the strength of the recovery."

"The cumulative loss to global GDP over 2020 and 2021 from the pandemic crisis could be around \$9 trillion, greater than the economies of Japan and Germany combined," Gopinath said. The coronavirus has infected nearly

two million people worldwide and killed close to 120,000, bringing travel to a standstill and forcing businesses, shops and restaurants to close.

"Much worse growth outcomes are possible and maybe even likely," the report cautioned, "if the pandemic and containment measures last longer... or if widespread scarring effects emerge due to firm closures and extended unemployment."

### 'The Great Lockdown'

The report, released ahead of the virtual spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank, said "The Great Lockdown"—as the IMF dubbed the global downturn—is the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. It also is the first contraction since 2009 during the global financial crisis, but that episode hardly bears comparison. Though the effects lingered, the decline amounted to just 0.1 percent, and large emerging market economies were still growing at a solid pace.

This year, the only economies expected to be spared from recession are China—where the virus originated—and India, but even those countries will see only relatively paltry growth of 1.2 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively. In the depression nearly a century ago, the global economy contracted by about 10 percent while advanced economies shrank by 16 percent from 1929 to 1932. The IMF now expects advanced economies to shrink by six percent in 2020. The US economy is expected to contract by 5.9 percent but see growth recover by 4.7 percent next year. However, the forecasts assume the pandemic will fade in the second half of the year. The IMF projects drops of 7.2 percent in France and 6.5 percent in Britain, but the governments in those countries are even more pessimistic, projecting contractions of eight percent and 13 percent, respectively.—AFP

## New iPhone may be coming

SAN FRANCISCO: Is now the time to launch a new iPhone?

Despite a pandemic-induced global economic crisis, Apple is widely believed to be set to release a reduced-priced handset that aims to fill a gap in its lineup, as early as this month.

Google could also follow a similar path, after Samsung last week unveiled new devices costs less than \$500. Reports suggest that the new Apple handset, to be called iPhone SE or iPhone 9, could have a starting price under \$400, and generate some growth with the timetable uncertain for a new flagship smartphone for the California giant.

"While launching a mid-cycle budget/entry-level smartphone into the backdrop of a consumer global lockdown and unprecedented pandemic will be head scratcher to some, we note that Apple is viewing this as a low volume, low touch release with little fanfare as the phones are already ready to ship," Wedbush Securities analyst Daniel Ives said in a research note.

Ives said Apple is likely to be able to sell 20 million to 25 million of the new devices before a new flagship iPhone 12 is ready to ship. Any new smartphone release would be without the splashy unveiling for which Apple is known, and would rely on online sales with most retail stores closed.

### Consumers seeking upgrades

South Korean colossus Samsung last week introduced new smartphones that included a model designed to work on much-hyped new-generation 5G mobile networks and priced less than \$500. "People might have less money to spend, but at the same time they want better technology," said Creative Strategies analyst Carolina Milanese.

"In the US, where it was very high-end or cheap smartphones and the middle had disappeared, that mid-tier has come back," Milanese said these new phones could have some appeal to financially strained consumers, as some high-end devices reach dizzying prices as much as \$1,500.

### Tis the season

Design and production of smartphones launching this year began long before the coronavirus pandem-



Despite a pandemic-induced global economic crisis, Apple is widely believed to be set to release a reduced-priced handset that aims to fill a gap in its lineup. — AFP

ic, meaning makers are locked into model specifications. "We are getting into the season," Milanese said of escalating rumors that Apple and Google are poised to announce new handsets.

But some of the new devices may end up being timely in appealing to budget-minded consumers seeking an upgrade or replacement. A mid-priced iPhone has potential to appeal to users more inter-

ested features such as cameras, screens, and battery life and less interested in "gimmicks" prized by early adopters, Milanese maintained.

"This is not a response to coronavirus for sure; it just seems to suit the market better," she said.

Apple has remained mum on any iPhone plans. Google has been known to introduce devices at its annual developers conference, which was slated for next month but cancelled due to the pandemic.

The likely entry for Google would be a Pixel 4A—a successor to its reduced-price sibling for its flagship Pixel smartphone. Analyst Patrick Moorhead of Moor Insights and Strategy said Apple and others are being forced to consider the economic upheaval.

"Forced to choose between buying a new iPhone and eating, people will chose to eat," Moorhead said.

"It's important for Apple to just not lose iPhone sales." It remains to be seen if the new devices can generate traction during the deep economic slump. The new models will be arriving at a time of surging use of desktop or laptop computers by people staying home instead of being out and about relying on smartphones, according to Milanese. "A lot of people are home, so mobility is not a top priority," the analyst said.—AFP



## Business

# Chinese economy contracts for first time in decades: Survey

## GDP may shrink to 1.7%, a dramatic drop from 6.1% expansion of last year

BEIJING: China's economy contracted for the first time in around three decades in the first quarter as the coronavirus crisis brought the country to a standstill, according to an AFP poll of economists.

The world's second-largest economy tanked in the first three months of the year as factories closed, consumers were compelled to stay home and the virus spread to other countries. Analysts from 14 institutions expect China's economy to have shrunk 8.2 percent from a year ago in the first quarter—the first contraction since quarterly data started to be reported in the early 1990s.



**Worst annual growth rate since 1976**

They also forecast that full-year gross domestic product (GDP) growth will come in at 1.7 percent, a dramatic drop from the 6.1 percent expansion logged last year and well below the pre-coronavirus prediction. If the forecast is accurate, it would represent the worst annual growth since 1976, the year Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong died.

The International Monetary Fund on Tuesday gave an even more dire estimate of 1.2 percent growth in 2020. While many businesses in China have resumed work, the coronavirus pandemic has brought other economies to their knees around the world with many key trading partners under lockdown.

The IMF said the pandemic will cut world output by three percent this year. Economists differed on the impact of the coronavirus on China's economy, with first-quarter contraction estimates ranging from 4.6 percent to 15 percent.

### Larger fall than expected

China's downturn is "more disappointing than anyone expected", said Moody's Analytics economist Xu Xiaochun. He also noted that China's workforce returned to work slower than anticipated, pointing to a significant contraction in the first quarter.

While labor supply will not be an issue in April and greater fiscal and monetary support for the economy is expected, "it will not be enough to overcome the heavy drag from suppressed world demand for the remainder of the year", he added. The slow return to work also bodes badly for jobs, and the unemployment rate has already risen from last December.

Economists at ANZ Research noted in a recent report that double-digit contractions in economic indicators for the first two months had not been followed by a strong bounce-back in March. Labor flows were also not back to pre-virus levels, especially in major production bases, they said. "This is despite the central government's efforts in encouraging workers to return to the cities where they work, such as the relaxation of travel restrictions," they added.

### Difficult recovery

Although the virus situation in China has largely improved, JP Morgan chief China economist Zhu Haibin said: "External risks will likely restrain the expected second-quarter recovery in China's export-related manufacturing activity." Lockdowns in other countries could disrupt global supply chains, while



**LIANYUNGANG:** Containers stacked at a port in Lianyungang in China's eastern Jiangsu province. China's foreign trade fell again in March even as businesses returned to work after the coronavirus outbreak, with the global pandemic weighing on the manufacturing powerhouse's outlook. — AFP

fears over imported cases will probably cause a slower return to normal life, delaying the recovery of China's service consumption and domestic demand, Zhu added.

Raphie Hayat, senior economist at Rabobank, added that the short-term impact of COVID-19 is expected to be "greater than the Great Financial Crisis of 2008/2009", with the fallout hurting China's growth. HSBC chief China economist Qu Hongbin warned that the shock to external demand should not

be seen as a mere trade contraction.

"US-China trade tensions last year showed us that an external demand shock can rapidly lead to a material deterioration in domestic demand growth," he said.

The hit to supply chains is "deeper and more sprawling" this time, he added. "As we are now forecasting a contraction or very weak growth in almost all Asian countries this year, the impact of the headwinds this year for China could be much deeper and more broad-based compared with last year." — AFP

## Investment strategies in current environment

DUBAI: As recently as mid-February, equity markets were near all-time highs, oil prices were above \$50 per barrel, volatility was low and credit markets were functioning well. Since then, the global market selloff across all asset classes has been sharp, driven by outlook uncertainty and the search for liquidity. With major indices plunging to new lows amid the news of the effect COVID-19 has had on global economies, investors are looking for ways to isolate risk and capitalize on investment opportunities.

### What lies ahead?

While the bad news about COVID-19 is likely to continue over the next couple of weeks as countries brace for a surge in numbers, equity markets could continue to get hit in the near-term before the positive impact of major stimulus packages takes root. Each recent policy decision taken by governments and central banks to support their economies has consequences for assets and securities. "In such tumultuous circumstances it is easy to lose conviction in the fundamental principles of investing, but these will certainly survive this crisis just as they have all previous ones," says Georg Elsaesser, Senior Portfolio Manager, Invesco Quantitative Strategies. "We need to keep a balanced perspective."

One of the basic principles of investing is that securities markets are always forward looking. This principle is embodied in the dividend discount model, which is a quantitative method used to predict the price of an asset based on the sum of its future cash flows discounted by an appropriate risk-adjusted rate. While small changes in the expectations of future cash flows or the discount rate can induce the same impact on return, the resulting long-term effects are different. Negative shocks to returns driven by an increase in discount rate tend to be more transitory, whereas negative shocks driven by cash flows could have a longer-term impact on companies. A factor approach can help, whether the crisis gets much worse or ultimately proves less severe than expected.

### How to proceed

With global markets in turmoil, factor investing provides a method for investors to screen for opportunities by scanning securities for attributes that seek to increase exposure to factors, or quantifiable characteristics, that the investor believes will deliver the best risk-adjusted returns. Due to the low correlation factors have with each other, diversifying across factors is one way to weather different economic environments, as some factors are less sensitive to economic shocks than others. "For instance, we have found that the equity factors producing the best returns in the equity market downturn have been quality, low volatility and momentum, whereas other factors have exhibited greater sensitivity such as value, size and yield," comments Elsaesser. A diversified multi-factor portfolio provides an inherent hedge if the crisis were to worsen or the recovery occurs more swiftly.

### Impact on local investors

Zainab Kufaishi, Head of Middle East and Africa, Invesco, comments: "Current market prices are reflecting the near-term effects of coronavirus. Whether we have witnessed the bottom of the market is yet unknown. Uncertainty is still high, so volatility is likely to remain high. But to the long-term investor, this effect is one of disruption, not damage. The vast majority of our investors in the Middle East have a long-term horizon with their investments, and should not try to foresee which factor will do well in the short-term. It is important not to forget the basic framework of diversification, discipline and time in factor investing."

### OBG special report

## Kuwait's coordinated response to COVID-19

KUWAIT: Kuwait's experience of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, a strain of coronavirus that first emerged in 2012, has stood it in good stead to respond effectively to the current COVID-19 pandemic. Several of the Gulf state's hospitals already featured triage units specialized in respiratory illnesses, with ventilation systems designed to prevent health care workers from becoming infected.

Building on this head start, Kuwait implemented strict precautionary measures after its first cases of Covid-19 were recorded in late February.

All non-cargo flights in and out of Kuwait were suspended as of March 13, making it the first Gulf state to ground all passenger flights. On this date mosques and public spaces such as parks and beaches were also closed, while on March 22 a nationwide curfew was imposed. Schools and universities were likewise suspended, with the date set for their re-opening pushed back until August 4 at the earliest. All state institutions will be closed until at least April 25.

Meanwhile, the five-star Al-Kout Beach Hotel and Al-Khiran resort have been repurposed as quarantine centers, and the International Fairgrounds in Mishref are being used as a field hospital and testing center. These coordinated responses are intended to slow the spread of the pandemic: Kuwait recorded its first Covid-19 fatality on April 4, while as of April 14 it had registered a total of 1355 cases and three deaths.

### Stimulus and SME support

In tandem with efforts to boost the resilience of the health care sector, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) has been taking steps to mitigate the economic and social fallout from the pandemic. On March 16 the CBK cut its benchmark interest rate by 100 basis points, to 1.5 percent. The bank also asked lenders to postpone loan repayments from companies particularly affected by the crisis.

Then on April 2 the CBK announced it was launching a substantial stimulus package.

Geared towards supporting key sectors and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the package modified regulations and macroprudential policy tools, as well as making available \$16.5bn for additional



lending from local banks. The CBK also cut capital adequacy requirements by 2.5 percent, and eased the risk weighting for SMEs, down to 25 percent from 75 percent.

"The recently-announced stimulus package will provide a very robust and effective defence against the short-term damage caused by the coronavirus," Alok Chugh, Partner, Government and Public Sector Leader MENA at Ernst & Young, told OBG. "SMEs have been at the center of the CBK's vision, and the reduction of the credit-risk weighting from 75 percent to 25 percent has enabled banks to substantially increase their lending to SMEs and thus provide them with very effective support during this crisis."

### Short-term headwinds

The CBK has underlined that it is well placed to implement significant measures: following the global economic crisis of 2008, the bank put in place protective policies that have given rise to a strong capital basis and substantial reserves. Nevertheless, in late March Moody's placed Kuwait's Aa2 rating on review for a downgrade, in light of a significant decline in government revenues.

Standard & Poor's likewise downgraded Kuwait's long-term sovereign credit to "AA-" from "AA". The ratings agency cited both the global fall in oil prices and the relatively slow pace of fiscal reform in the country. It also noted that the pandemic had highlighted Kuwait's lack of a sovereign debt law.

In a much-anticipated development, MSCI had been set to upgrade Kuwait from 'frontier market' to

'emerging market' status in May this year. However, while the Kuwaiti equity market continues to meet all the criteria, in light of Covid-19 this has been pushed back until November. Another major development that has been postponed is the acquisition of Bahrain's Ahli United Bank by Kuwait Finance House. The merger was given final approval in April, but will now take place in December this year.

### Participation in regional and global efforts

More broadly, and despite the disruption caused to global commerce and travel, Covid-19 has provided Kuwait with an opportunity to strengthen international ties. In mid-March Kuwait announced it was to provide financial assistance to regional neighbors Iraq, Palestine and Iran in their responses to the virus. Parallel to this, Kuwait donated \$40m to the World Health Organization to support its efforts to combat the pandemic.

Then, on April 7, Chinese ambassador Li Minggang met Abdullah Al-Afasi, the undersecretary of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Commerce and Industry, to discuss cooperation between the two nations over Covid-19, and how Kuwait could obtain medical supplies from China. Four days later, following a conversation between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his counterpart in Kuwait, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, a rapid response team of 15 doctors and healthcare professionals was sent from India to the Gulf state. The team is expected to stay for two weeks, supporting testing and treatment and training personnel.

businesses, including restaurants, have shifted to online sales, economists say the volumes are insufficient to close the gap from social distancing measures.

### Difficult month

The drag on sales from social restrictions is expected to far outweigh an anticipated surge in receipts at online retailers like Amazon, and grocery stores and pharmacies as consumers stocked up on household essentials such as food, toilet paper, cleaning supplies and medication.

"March was likely a difficult month for retail sales as the country adjusted to stay-at-home and social distancing policies related to COVID-19," said Ben Ayers, a senior economist at Nationwide in Columbus, Ohio. "Many car dealerships closed down operations altogether, while those that remained open have seen fewer customers than normal despite on-line activity."

Excluding automobiles, gasoline, building materials and food services, retail sales are forecast decreasing 2.0 percent in March, which would be the largest fall since December 2018. These so-called core retail sales were unchanged in February. Core retail sales correspond most closely with the consumer spending component of gross domestic product. With March's anticipated decrease, economists are forecasting consumer spending plunging at an annualized rate of at least 5.0 percent in the first quarter, which would be the weakest performance since the second quarter of 1980. Consumer spending accounts for more than two-thirds of US economic activity. It grew at a 1.8 percent pace in the fourth quarter, with the overall economy expanding at a 2.1 percent rate over that period. —Reuters

## Coronavirus knocking US retail sales

WASHINGTON: US retail sales likely suffered a record drop in March as mandatory business closures to control the spread of the novel coronavirus outbreak depressed demand for a range of goods, setting up consumer spending for its worst decline in decades. The report from the Commerce Department on Wednesday would come as millions of Americans are thrown out of work, and strengthen economists' conviction that the economy is in deep recession. States and local governments have issued "stay-at-home" or "shelter-in-place" orders affecting more than 90 percent of Americans to curb the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the virus, and abruptly stopping the country.

"The economy is almost in free fall," said Sung Won Sohn, a business economics professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. "We will see the bottom when the coronavirus infection rates stabilize. It's going to be a pretty deep bottom from which to come up."

According to a Reuters survey of economists, retail sales probably plunged 8.0 percent last month, signalling the biggest decline since the government started tracking the series in 1992. Retail sales fell 0.5 percent in February. Last month's anticipated drop in retail sales



**WASHINGTON:** US retail sales likely suffered a record drop in March as mandatory business closures to control the spread of the novel coronavirus outbreak depressed demand for a range of goods, setting up consumer spending for its worst decline in decades. — AFP

will reflect depressed receipts at car dealerships, with light vehicle sales crashing in March. With millions at home and crude oil prices collapsing amid worries of a deep global recession, gasoline prices have dropped, which is expected to have weighed on sales at service stations last month.

In addition, the closure of non-essential retailers probably knocked sales at clothing, sporting goods and furniture stores. Steep declines are also expected at restaurants and bars, which stopped in-person service and moved to take-out and delivery service. Though some



## Business

## Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait holds AGM

## ABK continues to perform well with operating income levels increasing

**KUWAIT:** Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK), held its Annual General Meeting (AGM) on 14th April, at 10 am, with a quorum of 84.4 percent, to discuss the bank's performance and AGM agenda, subsequent to releasing its financial results for the year ended 31st December, 2019.

For the Annual General meeting, ABK took a number of precautionary measures in line with the guidance of the Ministry of Health, aimed at protecting the health of attendees and shareholders, as these measures are of utmost importance during the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic.

Talal Mohamed Reza Behbehani, Chairman of ABK, opened the Annual General Meeting by welcoming the attendees and thanked them for their attendance despite the difficult circumstances the country is going through due to the coronavirus pandemic. He presented the directors' report for the financial year 2019, noting that overall the Bank continued to perform well with its operating income levels increasing. The reduction in net profit witnessed in 2019 was the result of a very conservative provisioning policy, which was applied on fully secured but non-performing legacy credits. The Group's asset quality remains very robust, with the NPL ratio at 1.46 percent and NPL provision coverage of 365 percent. The Capital Adequacy Ratio is a healthy 18.6 percent, comfortably exceeding the regulatory ratio, with shareholders' equity at KD 599 million.

ABK Group continued to maintain its strong ratings of A+ (stable) and A2 (stable) from International rating agencies Fitch and Moody's, making ABK the second best rated conventional bank in Kuwait, reflecting its strong capital position, resilient earnings capacity, stable funding and liquidity sources.

Domestic operations remain very much central to ABK's success, with more than 75 percent of its total assets based in Kuwait, partially insulating the Bank from external geopolitical risks. ABK's International operations contributed 30 percent of the Group's Operating Income. ABK-Egypt had another very successful year with Operating Income up 40 percent and Net Profit increasing 52 percent, while ABK's UAE operations also performed well with an increase in both Operating Income and Net Profit. ABK's DIFC branch has been extremely successful since opening in 2018 and continues to provide vital services to customers, offering a convenient off-



**Strong ratings of A+ (stable) and A2 (stable)**



Talal Mohamed Reza Behbehani

shore booking office for local and regional corporates, regional loan syndications, and large project finance transactions.

ABK's Structured Finance Division was actively engaged in government projects in areas such as power, waste and infrastructure, as part of Kuwait's 2035 plan. ABK recently signed on behalf of a consortium of banks, the PPP agreement for the Umm Hayman Waste Water Project for \$650 million. ABK was also the Initial Mandated Lead Arranger for ALAFCO's \$600 million syndicated loan.

Behbehani stated that despite the current challenges everyone is facing with coronavirus, the

Bank will continue implementing its 'Simplify & Transform' strategy, with the aim of delivering new customer experiences, digital transformation and operational efficiency. In order to meet the ever-evolving needs of increasingly "tech-savvy" customers, ABK launched a range of digital initiatives, some of which were first to the market, designed to make accessing banking services simpler, easier and more convenient. The Bank also launched the Tasdeed service for Point-Of-Sale (POS) and e-Com Online Payment Gateway transactions related to the Kuwait ministries and government authorities during the year.

During 2019, ABK embarked on a range of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, as part of the Group's commitment to make a difference in the communities it operates in. These efforts were strongly supported by ABK staff, who actively engaged in volunteer programs. Through CSR initiatives, ABK advocates inclusive, social and sustainable development and the creation of a more



KUWAIT: Talal Mohamed Reza Behbehani welcoming the attendees during the annual general meeting (AGM) on Tuesday.

equitable society. More details can be found in the CSR booklet accompanying the Annual Report and on ABK's website, eahli.com.

The Bank will continue to invest heavily in local talent development through training and recruitment initiatives, and will look to offer further opportunities for Kuwaiti youth to develop successful careers in the banking sector. The General Assembly then moved on to discuss the agenda, and approved all agenda items. The most important items were as follows:

- Approval of the Directors' Report on ABK financial year ended 31st December 2019 and approval of the External Auditors' Report on ABK for the financial year ended 31st December 2019.

- Approval of ABK Financials inclusive of its Balance Sheet and Profit & Loss Account for the financial year ended 31st December 2019.

- Approval to stop the deduction for the compulsory reserve account for the financial year ending December 31, 2020 which stood at KD 81,010 thousand, with the addition of KD 1,512 thousand from the profits of the financial year ended 2019. The amount in the compulsory reserve account as at 31st December 2019 is more than half of the Bank's issued and paid up capital of KD 161,917 thousand.

- Approval of the recommendation of the Board of Directors to distribute cash dividends for the financial year ended 31/12/2019 at the rate of 7 per-

cent (seven percent) of the nominal value per share (i.e. seven fils per share), to the shareholders registered in the Bank's shareholders' records as at the close of business on Monday 4/5/2020.

The cash dividends shall be distributed to the entitled shareholders, as of Sunday 10/5/2020.

- Approval to authorize the Board of Directors to buy, sell, or dispose of no more than 10 percent (ten percent) of the Bank's own shares, according to the controls and conditions stipulated by the law, decisions, regulations, and instructions of the regulatory authorities in this regard, and that this mandate continues to apply for a period of eighteen months from the date of this Annual General Meeting.

- Approval to authorize the Board of Directors to issue bonds of all kinds in Kuwaiti Dinars or any other currency it deems appropriate inside and / or outside the State of Kuwait and determining the terms and conditions of these bonds. The Board of Directors may seek the assistance of those it deems necessary to issue bonds after obtaining the approval of the regulatory authorities.

- Approval to deal with subsidiaries, associates and other related parties during the financial year 2020.

- Approval to grant loans and advances and to provide guarantees and other credit facilities to its client during the financial year 2020, in accordance with the regulations and conditions that the Bank applies to third parties.

## Trump says close to plan to reopen economy

**WASHINGTON:** President Donald Trump said on Tuesday he is close to completing a plan to end the coronavirus shutdown and reopen the battered US economy with some parts of the country likely to be ready to go before May 1. Standing in the White House Rose Garden, Trump said he would "authorize" governors - despite doubts from some experts that the presidency has such powers - to implement plans in their states at the appropriate time. He said he would speak to all 50 governors about the plan, probably on Thursday by video conference.

Trump's coronavirus task force has recommended people across the country follow strict social distancing guidelines through the end of April. Opening some states before that would go against the guidelines in their current form. Trump, facing re-election on Nov. 3 and under pressure to get the economy going again after millions have been made jobless by the shutdown, said some states should be able to reopen soon, based on a low rate of infections.

"We think that some of the governors will be in really good shape to open up even sooner" than the end of April, Trump said. "Others are going to have to take a longer period of time."

Trump had initially said he hoped to reopen the economy by Easter in mid-April, but the mounting toll of infections and projected deaths forced him to extend federal guidelines for 30 days to the end of April. Some medical experts question whether the country will be ready by then.

The president drew fire from governors for saying on Monday at a contentious briefing that he has "total authority" to order them to reopen. Constitutional experts have doubted he has such authority but Trump has not backed down. In an interview with CNN on Tuesday, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said he would not follow orders from Trump to reopen his state if it would endanger New Yorkers, arguing any such move would create a constitutional challenge that pits states against the federal government.

"And the worst possible thing he could do at this moment - to act dictatorial and to act in a partisan, divisive way," Cuomo said, referring to the president's reelection bid. "Keep the politics out of it."

Trump said he would not press states to re-open, and indicated each state would have its own individual date for starting the process. "If we're unhappy with a state, we're going to let them know we're unhappy," Trump said, adding that he would take action if health data changed. If numbers went in the wrong direction, he said, "We'll have to do something that's ... very serious. We'll have to maybe close 'em up and start all over again. But I don't think we're going to have to do that." —Reuters

## Oil in the age of coronavirus and a US shale bust

**HOUSTON/DENVER:** Texas oilman Mike Shellman has kept his MCA Petroleum Corp going for four decades, drilling wells through booms and busts and always selling his crude to US oil refiners.

But now the second-generation oilman has abandoned drilling any new wells this year and postponed some maintenance amid a sharp drop in global oil prices and brimming storage tanks. He is considering shutting most of his production down, for the first time ever. Oil fields from Texas and New Mexico to Oklahoma and North Dakota are going quiet as drilling halts and tens of thousands of oil workers lose their livelihood. Fuel demand has plunged by as much as 30 million barrels per day (bpd) - or 30 percent - as efforts to fight the coronavirus pandemic have grounded aircraft, reduced vehicle usage and pushed economies worldwide toward recession.

"What scares me is not even being able to sell the product," the grizzled oil hand said from his firm's San Marcos, Texas, headquarters. Refiners and other buyers are warning they may refuse his oil once contracts expire this month, he said. Or they may offer to buy at a price below his costs, so he is preparing to dip into retirement savings to pay employees, he said.

The governments of global oil producers and consumers are seeking to make unprecedented cuts to overall supply of some 19.5 million bpd. US President Donald Trump heralded the deal to cut supply as one that would save hundreds of thousands of US jobs.

But oil prices fell again this week, dropping as much as 10 percent on Tuesday, because even those cuts may fail to stem the glut. Prices remain far below production costs for many US producers, including those in the US shale fields - the scene of

a revolution in the energy industry over the past decade that made the United States the world's top producer.

Across the United States, up to 240,000 oil-related jobs will be lost this year, about a third of the onshore and offshore oilfield workforce, estimates consultancy Rystad Energy. The US oil boom died on March 6, the day Saudi Arabia and Russia ended a four-year pact that curbed output and gave shale a price umbrella. Shale firms have accrued hefty debt during the years of expansion, leaving them exposed to the price crash that followed. In March, US oil futures tumbled to \$20 a barrel, a third of the January price and less than half what many require to cover production costs. The March drop led dozens of shale producers to cut spending and several retained debt advisors.

"As soon as the virus hit and oil prices dropped, they sent everybody home," said Joel Rodriguez, chief administrator of La Salle County, home of Texas's second-most productive oilfield.

Shale oil producers face well closures and "industry wide financial distress" even after the OPEC cuts, said Artem Abramov, head of shale at consultancy Rystad Energy. In some fields, he expects regional prices will hit single-digits per barrel, he said. Spending on oil field services will fall 21 percent to \$211 billion this year, the lowest since 2005, according to researcher Spears & Associates.

Unlike the 2014-2016 oil bust, lenders are not making more financing available to producers, said Raoul Nowitz, head of restructuring at SOLIC Capital Advisors. He predicts up to 60 oil producers will seek protection from creditors this year, and many will not emerge under new owners. Some banks are setting up operations to take over and run failed producers.

### Layoff and shut-ins

OPEC's cuts may not be deep enough for oil producer Texland Petroleum, which operates 1,200 wells in the Permian Basin, the top US oilfield. US refiner and pipeline operator Phillips 66 asked President Jim Wilkes to reduce his deliveries by 15 percent, and another buyer canceled his contract outright.



Oil fields from Texas and New Mexico to Oklahoma and North Dakota are going quiet as drilling halts and tens of thousands of oil workers lose their livelihood.

"We've never had a time when we couldn't sell the oil we produce. And that's going to happen this time," said Wilkes. Average daily US oil production this year will fall 500,000 bpd, to 11.8 million bpd and sink another 700,000 bpd next year, the Energy Information Administration estimated. Production cuts are too late for workers like Jeremy Davis, a 36-year-old who in March lost his business development job at Advanced BioCatalytics, which makes chemicals for hydraulic fracturing.

"They won't be fracking many wells for the rest of the year," said Davis, who after 16 years in the oilfield would now consider work outside the oil business. "I can't wait around for the industry to come back," he said. Wall Street investors had already pulled back on the shale sector over the past couple of years because of poor returns, leaving producers with limited options for refinancing, said industry executives and analysts.

"There is no more lifeline," said Lance Loeffler, the finance chief at top U.S. fracking service provider Halliburton Co. PayZone Directional Services, a Denver-based driller, threw in the towel last month.

"We could have stayed open and run until the money was gone but sometimes you just have to know when to cash in your chips and leave the table," said Beth Thibodeaux, chief executive officer. —Reuters

### Eyeing 20% unemployment

JPMorgan Chief Financial Officer Jennifer Piepszak said the projections are a best guess in a cloudy landscape due to the uncertain evolution of the virus and the unknowable potential lift from US stimulus programs. "That's absolutely the hardest thing to try to predict right now," she said during a briefing with reporters, "the path of the virus and the path for the economy and when and how it reopens."

JPMorgan's economists currently project US unemployment will reach 20 percent in the second quarter before recovering in the latter half of the year, Piepszak said.

Dimon hopes the economy can be ramped up soon, but told analysts, "It won't be May. You talk about June, July, August, something like that." The biggest US bank by assets, JPMorgan reported profits of \$2.9 billion for the quarter ending March 31, down 69 percent from the year-ago period. Revenue dipped three percent to \$28.3 billion. —AFP

## JPMorgan, Wells Fargo profits hit

**WASHINGTON, DC:** Earnings plunged at JPMorgan Chase and Wells Fargo Tuesday as both US banking giants set aside billions of dollars to cover loans vulnerable to the economic devastation from coronavirus shutdowns. Pointing to what Chief Executive Jamie Dimon called the "likelihood of a fairly severe recession," JPMorgan booked reserves of nearly \$8.3 billion, including a build of \$6.8 billion in the first quarter.

Wells Fargo announced a reserve build of \$3.3 billion. Like their counterparts at JPMorgan, Wells Fargo executives signaled the number could rise further. "If confidence does deteriorate and the shelters-in-place stay on for longer, it wouldn't surprise me if the loss estimates would have to go up,"

Wells Fargo Chief Executive Charlie Scharf told analysts on a conference call.

"There's more downside than upside given the uncertainty in this environment."

The reserves led to staggering drops in first-quarter profits at both banks. Bank of America, Goldman Sachs and other large banks report later this week. Like other key US sectors, banks had enjoyed relatively prosperous conditions until government officials instituted a series of lockdown measures beginning in March to try to limit the spread of the coronavirus, shocking the economy and sending millions into unemployment.

Both banks are granting relief in the wake of downturn, with JPMorgan allowing a 90-day grace period on mortgage or credit card payments and Wells Fargo suspending property foreclosure sales.

But the reserves announced Tuesday reflect the banks' current assessment of where they could suffer defaults as the economy struggles to find its footing.



# Ahead of the curve: S Korea's evolving strategy to prevent a virus resurgence

SEOUL: A smartphone tracking app for new airport arrivals. A "smart city" database of thousands of people infected by the new coronavirus and their contacts. Electronic bracelets that track people breaking quarantine laws. South Korea, among the first countries to bring a major coronavirus outbreak under control, is now taking steps to control the disease well into the future, relying heavily on technology and its hyper-connected society.

The aim is to reinvigorate Asia's fourth-largest economy and keep it humming by building on the country's success identifying and tracking cases without imposing major mandatory lockdowns or requiring businesses to keep employees working from home, officials say. "Without resorting to lockdowns or bans on movements, we have been able to keep our factories running to a large degree, and this is instilling the idea to the world that we are a safe and transparent production base," President Moon Jae-in said last week.

South Korea's evolving playbook is being closely watched in Europe and the United States, where governments are hoping to quickly bounce back from the crisis. "We are in a lengthy tug of war with the coronavirus," Health Minister Park Neung-hoo said last week. The battle could last months or even years, he said.

### Supercharged tracking

South Korea's virus-containment strategy will build on an intensive contact tracing and testing campaign that experts say has been instrumental in uncovering webs of infections that might otherwise have gone undetected. Besides the testing kits and tracing techniques that have already been rolled out, South Korea plans to build out a "smart city" database and get quarantine violators to agree to

use tracking bracelets. The database was designed to share information between cities on things like traffic and pollution. Health authorities plan to leverage that network to reduce the time it takes to find and isolate coronavirus cases.

The database will be operated by the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), giving epidemiological investigators real-time data feeds on patients, including their whereabouts, times spent at specific locations, CCTV footage, and credit card transactions. That could cut the time needed to trace a patient's movements from about one day to around ten 10 minutes, according to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, or MOLIT, which originally set up the "smart city" initiative.

Along with information uploaded by the KCDC, the system compiles data from the National Police Agency, the Credit Finance Association of Korea, three telecommunications companies and 22 credit card companies. Lee Soo-young, a director of the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology's Institute for Artificial Intelligence, said the technology would help investigators track cases more efficiently, even if it raised privacy issues.

However, MOLIT said that investigators will need to obtain police approval to see information, and access to the database will be restricted to a small number of authorized users, ensuring the confidentiality of unrelated personal information. MOLIT also said the database information would be deleted when the outbreak was contained. A coalition of 17 human rights groups has expressed privacy concerns about the adoption of the tracking wristbands for people who violate quarantines, citing potential discrimination against patients. In response, the authorities have said that the wrist-

bands would only be used if patients consent.

### Testing foreign arrivals

Another key to the South Korean virus containment strategy is stepping up border controls. Around half of new cases in recent weeks have been found in people arriving from overseas, according to the KCDC. Rather than outright bans, South Korea is using widespread testing and technology-enabled tracking to allow people to travel to the country. Mandatory testing and quarantines now apply to nearly all arrivals from overseas, including citizens.

South Korea installed walk-through facilities this month at Seoul's Incheon International Airport to test anyone who arrives with symptoms. Those who don't show symptoms will also be tested within three days. All arrivals must download a government app that tracks their location and requires users to report any symptoms. Then everyone, regardless of nationality or whether they tested negative, must self-isolate for two weeks. After the two-week period, the app shows a message saying users are free to delete it from their phones.

### Adapting distancing

Health officials say they are also looking to adapt the social distancing policies they called for early in the crisis - urging people to avoid large gatherings or leave their homes, but imposing no actual "stay home" orders - in coming weeks. The government plans to develop more practices in homes, offices, and public places to reduce the risk of another large outbreak, while allowing economic and social life to resume.

Some of the long-term policies being discussed include making workplaces less crowded, and per-

suading Koreans that it is not a virtue to show up at work when sick, Yoon Tae-ho, director general for public health policy at the health ministry said. In a glimpse of what could become long-term practices, the KCDC last week outlined preventive measures for schools, churches and some entertainment facilities that included disinfection schedules, guidelines on how close people can be to each other and temperature checks.

"Our goal is to be able to control infections in a way that our health and medical system, including personnel and sickbeds, can handle them at usual levels," Park, the health minister, said. South Korean officials say that means keeping new cases under 50 per day, a level first reached last week. On Tuesday, South Korea reported 27 new cases. The country is also stepping up efforts to improve testing and boost resources for hospitals.

Hospitals are testing all pneumonia patients, and staff at places like nursing homes and medical facilities will be regularly tested. Authorities have designated two new hospitals and are building a third to specialize in treating infectious diseases. The government, in a supplementary budget, has allocated an extra 135 billion won (\$111 million) to build 120 additional isolation rooms, buy more medical equipment and specialized ambulances, cover the costs of medical staff handling coronavirus cases, and prepare for future epidemics.

New regulations also designate supplies like face masks, safety goggles, disinfectants, protective clothing, and infrared cameras to detect fevers as strategic items that will be stockpiled by the government, the Ministry of Interior and Safety said. "We will have to step up our daily hygiene and disease prevention standards," Yoon said. "It will be a tedious battle, but we have to do this." — Reuters

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Piano teacher Evan Kam, 28, wearing a face mask, arrives at the village of his students in a piano truck in Hong Kong. — AFP photos



Alfred Tang (left), 10, and his sister Yoyo Tang (right), 6, are seen in their bedroom before Alfred plays music after they had their piano lesson in a 'piano truck' in Hong Kong.



Piano teacher Evan Kam (left), 28, wears a face mask as he gives hand sanitizer to two of his students, Alfred Tang, 10, and his sister Yoyo Tang, 6, before a lesson in a 'piano truck' in Hong Kong.

# Piano van: Hong Kong music lessons go mobile to beat virus



Piano student Yoyo, 6, wears a face mask during a piano lesson in a 'piano truck' in Hong Kong.

Yoyo, 6, frowns with concentration as she plays the piano in the back of a truck — still able to practice thanks to an innovative Hong Kong music school keeping lessons going during the coronavirus pandemic. While Hong Kong's infections remain comparatively low — just over 1,000 cases and four deaths — schools have been shut since late January and authorities have ramped up social distancing measures in recent weeks. Schools and tutoring services have had to switch to online lessons. But music tutors like Evan Kam are trying to keep personal lessons going — whilst reducing the risk of infection for both teachers and students.

"Video teaching doesn't suit us well as piano fingerings and gestures are better instructed with a teacher by your side," the 28-year-old told AFP. The tutoring centre where Kam works saw business plunge by 70 percent in February when infections first crossed into Hong Kong from mainland China. Many students stopped attending because they did not want to take public

transport. Inspired by mobile libraries, the company rented three trucks and fitted them into mobile music classrooms, complete with air-conditioning and soundproof boards.

"We wanted to keep our colleagues employed. That's why we wanted to step out of our comfort zone and see how far we can go," said Jessica Lam, the firm's business development manager. "We like to offer our services directly to where the students live to shorten their travelling time," she added. Last week Kam's truck was in Ha Tsuen, a remote village in northwest Hong Kong, close to the border with China. After parking, he cleaned the keyboard, set up an air purifier, sprayed a doormat with disinfectant, and prepared hand sanitizer for his students. Soon Alfred Tang, 10, and his sister Yoyo arrived.

Both beginners, Alfred played a gentle ballad called "Proud of You", while Yoyo perfected a rendition of the notoriously catchy "Baby Shark". Their mother, who declined to give her first name, said the lessons were a highlight for the youngsters, who are cooped-up at home for most of the week.



"It's convenient for us, as we can just go downstairs and take lessons," she told AFP. "My children mostly just stay at home as schools have been suspended and we don't go into town that much." — AFP

Yoyo Tang, 6, plays piano as her mother (right) listens, in their bedroom, after Yoyo and her brother Alfred, 10, (not seen) had their piano lesson in a 'piano truck' in Hong Kong.

## Music capital Vienna silenced by coronavirus crisis

Austria had hoped the year 2020 would be dedicated to celebrating the 250th anniversary of the birth of composer Ludwig van Beethoven, who died in Vienna in 1827. But confronted with the coronavirus pandemic, one of the world's music capitals has been silenced, leaving an entire sector fearing for its future. Although Austria on Tuesday started easing strict confinement measures with shops opening again, resuming cultural life for now is still out of the question. "The Vienna State Opera usually resembles an anthill where 1,000 people are busy," opera director Dominique Meyer tells AFP. "Now the place is silent, and it is emotionally very trying."

Normally not a day goes by in Vienna when there isn't an orchestra performance to listen to or an operetta to admire or a festival to attend. But it all came to an abrupt halt a month ago, with concert halls among the first to shut their doors when the government banned large gatherings to fight the spread of the new coronavirus. Usually "Vienna offers a cultural program comparable to that of a metropolis of five million inhabitants though only 1.8 million live in the city," tourist office director Norbert Kettner says. "This is what attracts three quarters of the eight million annual visitors," he adds. Three operas, two concert halls: usually some 10,000 people crowd these temples of music each evening. And people have to wait as many as 14 years before hoping to get a subscription to the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

### 'Vital economic lung'

For the city of carefree waltzes composed by musicians like Johann Strauss, the cultural machine's halt spells the worst financial disaster since the end of World War II. "The Vienna State Opera usually generates 131,000 euros (\$143,000) daily in revenue from ticket sales," Meyer says. "It is a vital economic lung that fills six or seven nearby hotels and a lot of restaurants after performances." Among those also hit hard are the artists themselves.

"I was to play Arabella in May, go to Toronto, to Istanbul, to Paris," tenor Michael Schade tells AFP. "I will not sing Schubert; 30 concerts are cancelled," baritone Florian Boesch says. "Performance venues are invoking force majeure. We don't receive any compensation at all." Contracts are left to expire without any offer of compensation — or sometimes terminated abruptly, says Laurent Delage, an agent for



In this file photo taken on March 11, 2020 a skateboarder skates his board past the closed State Opera in Vienna, Austria. — AFP

opera singers and conductors.

### 'Cannot be silenced'

Postponing productions scheduled years in advance is difficult or even impossible, so set decorations and costumes become useless. "When a project falls through, an entire microcosm collapses," opera director Benjamin Prins says. "Technicians, lighting designers, singers: they have given six months of their lives for rehearsals without a penny as generally, they don't get paid until the evening of the premiere." In the absence of unemployment insurance systems, the Austrian government has put in place some support, allowing artists to obtain at least 1,000 euros (\$1,100) per month for 16 weeks.

Beyond this, the highly internationalized sector remains dependent on governments' decisions to reopen their borders, as well as Austria's announcement to re-launch its cultural life. But the government has already said public events are cancelled until at least end of June. The Alpine nation of 8.8 million people has reported more than 14,000 cases with more than 380 deaths so far, though the surge in new infections has subsided. "I'm starting to tell myself that there won't be any shows before September," says Kettner of the tourist office, adding that "culture is in the DNA of people — we can't do without it." Artists like Boesch vow to keep signing, even without a stage in a concert hall. "There has never been so much music online," he says. "We cannot be silenced." — AFP



In this file photo visitors listen as Latvian conductor Andris Nelsons conducts the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra during the "New Year's Concert 2020" at the Musikverein concert hall in Vienna, Austria. — AFP

## Cannes film festival difficult to hold 'in original form'

It will be difficult to hold the Cannes film festival in its original form in 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak, organizers said Tuesday, adding they were looking at new ways of hosting the world's biggest annual celebration of cinema. The festival had already been postponed from its original mid-May dates to late June and early July. But organizers said this is "no longer an option" after President Emmanuel Macron said cultural festivals could not resume until mid-July at the earliest. "It is clearly difficult to assume that the Festival de Cannes could be held this year in its original form," the organizers said in a statement, adding they were exploring "all contingencies" to realize Cannes 2020 "in one way or another." — AFP

## As virus halts protests, Algerians turn to 'Radio Corona'

Algerians stuck in pandemic lockdown and dismayed with their government are tuning into an irreverent online broadcaster that is keeping their protest spirit alive: Radio Corona Internationale. Created in an expatriate's dining room in the United States, RCI offers a cocktail of political talk, caustic humor and popular music to give listeners rare moments of freedom amid the gloom of confinement. The one-hour show airs live via Facebook on Tuesdays and Fridays, the weekdays when "Hirak" anti-government protesters would take to the streets for the past year until organizers suspended the rallies because of COVID-19.

Its host is well-known Algerian broadcaster Abdellah Benadouda, 49, who fled his homeland in 2014 after falling out with the powerful inner circle around former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. "I missed the revolution," says Benadouda with regret, referring to last year's unprecedented popular uprising that ended the two-decade reign of the ailing leader. Since then, the protests had continued, demanding the wider dismantling of the political "system" that has held a tight grip on the North African country — until the pandemic put a halt to them last month. Benadouda said that ever since the Hirak movement started in February 2019, "only my body is here in Providence," the capital of the US state of Rhode Island.

The online station is "a way to reinvent the Hirak in the time of confinement," he said, vowing to keep broadcasting even after the end of the public health crisis that has claimed almost 300 lives in Algeria. Benadouda is a former public radio journalist and presenter of the offbeat news show "Systeme Dz" on the private channel Dzair TV. He left Algeria fearing retribution after a dispute with Dzair TV, which is owned by Ali Haddad, a powerful businessman who was seen as close to the Bouteflika clan and who is now in prison for corruption. — AFP

## Rolex, Patek Philippe ditch Baselworld to create new watch fair

Five of the world's biggest luxury watchmakers, including Rolex, Patek Philippe and Chanel, announced Tuesday they would withdraw from Baselworld to create a new watch fair. Also joined by jeweler Chopard and Rolex subsidiary Tudor, the brands that for decades were considered pillars of the iconic fair in the northern Swiss city of Basel have decided to leave and instead create an annual event in Geneva, starting in April 2021, the Foundation High Horology (FHH) said in a statement. "This departure follows a number of unilateral decisions made without consultation by Baselworld management," the statement said.

It criticized the fair organizers for, among other things, unilaterally deciding to cancel the 2020 edition, which had been scheduled to kick off at the end of April, amid concerns over the novel coronavirus pandemic. It also slammed the organizers' "inability to meet the brands' needs and expectations." The new show, which will be organized in cooperation with FHH, will take place in early April 2021 at Palexpo in Geneva, it said. "We have taken part in Baselworld since 1939," Rolex chief Jean-Frederic Dufour, who is also a board member of Montres Tudor, said in the statement. "Unfortunately, given the way the event has evolved... and in spite of the great attachment we had to this watch show, we have decided to withdraw," he said.

The MCH Group which organizes Baselworld said in a statement that it had received the news of the exhibitors' departure with "great surprise and equally great regret." It stressed that the decision to push the next edition of its show back to January had been decided "jointly with leading exhibitors", and that "the companies now 'migrating' — including Rolex — spoke out in favor of a postponement to January 2021." The companies in question "are also represented on the Exhibitors' Committee, where the future vision of Baselworld has been discussed on several occasions and has met with a positive response," it said. "The intention to move to Geneva has never been mentioned. The MCH Group must therefore conclude that the relevant plans have been in preparation for some time and that the discussions concerning the financial arrangements for the cancellation of Baselworld 2020 are now being put forward as an argument."

Baselworld was long considered the signature event of the year for the watch industry, but the organizers have in recent years faced a range of criticisms, including over high costs, prompting several large brands to bid it adieu. Swatch Group, which includes brands like Omega, Longines and Tissot, slammed the door last year to create a new event in Zurich. — AFP





Lifestyle | Features

# Algerian author wins top Arab fiction prize for 'Spartan Court'

Algerian author Abdelouhab Aissaoui on Tuesday won a prestigious prize for Arabic fiction with his novel "The Spartan Court". Backed by the UK's Booker Prize Foundation, the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) is financed by Abu Dhabi's Department of Culture and Tourism. Aissaoui will receive \$50,000 and funds will be provided to translate the book into English, the organizers said on their website. Published by Dar Mim, "The Spartan

Court" is a historical novel that relates the power struggle between Ottoman and French colonial powers in Algeria at the start of the 19th century.

Born in the northern Algerian city of Djelfa in 1985, Aissaoui graduated in electromechanical engineering before devoting himself to writing, penning several books and receiving many awards. The Spartan Court "invites the reader to gain a greater understanding of live under occupation and the different forms of resist-

ance that grow against it," said Muhsin Al-Musawi, chair of the prize's five-member judging panel. "With its deep, historical narrative structure, the novel does not live in the past, but rather it challenges the reader to question present reality," he added, in remarks published on the IPAF website. "The Spartan Court" was chosen from a shortlist of six novels. The five other authors, from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria will each receive \$10,000, the organizers said.

They said one aim of the prize, conceived in Abu Dhabi in 2007, is to promote the translation of Arabic literature into English. Due to movement restrictions imposed by UAE authorities to stem the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, the winner was announced online. Abu Dhabi, capital of the emirate of the same name, has become an increasingly significant cultural hub and hosts the Louvre Abu Dhabi museum. — AFP



Mural artists Sulis Listanto (right) and Junaidi Sofyan (left) posing next to their artwork.



Mural artist Mujiono posing with his artwork.



Mural artist Dache Samant posing next to his artwork.



Mural artist Junaidi Sofyan posing next to his artwork.



Mural artists Mastantio (left) and Yahya (right) posing with their artwork.



Mural artist Sulis Listanto posing next to his artwork as local artists join the campaign in the fight against the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in Depok, West Java. —AFP photos

## SCYTHES AND MONSTERS: INDONESIAN ARTISTS TEACH CORONAVIRUS CARE

From scythe-wielding monsters to a globe fending off coronavirus with an umbrella, a group of Indonesian artists has turned to wall murals to help stem a growing number of infections. The Jakarta-area artists saw orders for their work dry up as the pandemic hit and decided to use that extra time to paint the walls of their neighborhoods and educate the public about the deadly disease. "This unnecessary panic moved me to do these murals. I wanted to rebuild our spirit so we've got the positive energy back to fight against coronavirus," said artist Sulis Listanto. "It's easier to educate people through pictures."

So Listanto painted a globe being attacked by the virus with the words "Save the world". Another had a darker tone featur-

ing a cat-like monster carrying a scythe with the words "Covid-19". Fellow mural artist Yahya — who like many Indonesians goes by one name — was inspired to paint a colorful montage advising people to stay at home. "We used to paint murals at schools or cafes, but we don't have any jobs now," he said. "Through this work we're urging people to stay at home and to appreciate health workers." "We tried to make the murals colorful and bright so they can radiate positive energy and keep people optimistic in this difficult time," he said. As of Tuesday, 459 people had died of the virus with more than 4,800 confirmed cases, according to Indonesia's government. —AFP



Mural artist Ray Andree posing next to his artwork.



Mural artist Liong Fadillah posing next to his artwork.



Murals created by local artists.

### Woman fined for taking turtle for a walk in Rome

An Italian woman who took her pizza-sized turtle out for a walk has been fined 400 euros (\$440) by the Roman police for breaking strict coronavirus confinement rules. Italians need a justifiable reason to be out on the street in the middle of a pandemic that has officially claimed more than 20,000 lives in the Mediterranean country since February. Taking your dog out for a walk is viewed as a good enough reason to leave your home. But it seems taking your turtle out for one is not.

The Roman police said "the 60-year-old woman was caught outside her home without a justifiable reason" and fined. "The woman was walking with a turtle," the police statement said. Roman police spokesman Nunzio Carbone told AFP that the woman was fined 400 euros because it was "not a justifiable excuse". Italian authorities reported issuing a record 16,545 fines on Easter Monday — a national holiday in the largely Catholic country. Another 13,756 fines were issued on Sunday. Italians have been joking on social media about renting out their dogs to anyone who was going stir crazy and needed a good excuse to go out. Carbone said the turtle was "as big as a pizza" but not wearing a leash. —AFP

### Fewer meetings, more toilet lids: What workplaces will look like after lockdowns

Around the world countries are hitting their coronavirus peaks and starting to grapple with questions about when and how to reopen their economies. But those people fortunate enough to have not lost their jobs should be prepared for a "new normal" when they finally go back to work, say experts. Here is a preview of what to expect.

#### No handshakes, fewer meetings

Handshakes are out "indefinitely," said Tom Frieden, the former director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Next, offices will need to start thinking about practical measures. "Can we have doors that don't have to be opened by people? Should we be taking the temperatures of all people who enter?" he said in a call with reporters. No-touch hand sanitizer dispensers will become common. Steps may be taken to reduce overcrowding in common spaces, and computers and phones may no longer be shared. Mask use will be encouraged, and some workplaces may provide them.

Businesses like supermarkets are already keeping down the number of people who can enter, placing clear plastic barriers between employees and customers and enforcing physical distancing — this could be extended to all shops, cafes and face-to-face engagements. Offices may also stagger employee hours and have workers come in on different days so that fewer people are present at a given time — and cut meetings. "One of the positive impacts of COVID I hope will be fewer meetings, because there are just too many meetings," added Frieden.

#### More sick days

"Staying at home if you are sick may be encouraged vs discouraged," said Brandon Brown, a University of California Riverside epidemiologist. The US has a famously brutal work culture driven in part by the fact there is no federally mandatory sick leave. As a result, people tend to power through despite illness: an October 2019 nationwide survey of 2,800 workers by the accounting firm Robert Half found that 33 percent always go in when sick. That may change.

Telework may become more common for many, especially as people have learned during enforced lockdowns that it is possible. "One thing that we found out from this pandemic and sheltering in place at home, is that in-person meetings are not always necessary. Virtual meetings should be an ongoing option from here on out," added Brown.

#### Counseling provided?

The pandemic has already extracted a devastating death toll, particularly in the hardest-hit region New York, and the onus for providing counseling may fall to great extent on employers. "Don't forget a lot of people are gonna go back to work having lost family members," said Marc Wilkenfeld, a doctor who specializes in occupational medicine at NYU Langone Health. "I think the bigger companies or even the smaller companies are going to need to address these issues, because you do want a workforce coming back healthy, physically and mentally."

#### Toilet lids and better plumbing

Workplaces will continue to hammer home the message to wash hands regularly and thoroughly, said Brown. Often touched surfaces will be cleaned more frequently, but greater attention will need to be placed on keeping bathrooms clean and improving plumbing, since there is some evidence that the coronavirus can be spread via feces. A recent Lancet paper recommended "do not ignore unexplained foul smells in bathrooms, kitchens, or wash areas" and included tips for improving plumbing like having functioning U-bends that prevent the outflow of sewage gases.

One step toward mitigating the risk is flushing the toilet with the lid down, since a flush can release up to 80,000 contaminated droplets and leave them suspended in the air for hours if it's not covered, according to a recent Hong Kong study. But many toilets in modern workspaces lack lids — a trend that may be reversed.

#### Who returns first

People over the age of 65 or who have underlying conditions like heart disease or diabetes are at higher risk for complications arising from COVID-19 — and their return to offices will come later. "When people start to go back to work, I think that it's going to be that not everyone goes back at the same time," Wilkenfeld said. —AFP





A person walks past a mural thanking healthcare personnel, shopkeepers, French national security, post office staff members and farmers in Paris on Tuesday amid a lockdown in France to stop the spread of COVID-19. —AFP

## Why has the OPEC-led deal failed to energize oil prices?



**LONDON:** Global oil traders have shrugged off Sunday's historic output-cutting deal by OPEC and its allies, with prices languishing not far from recent two-decade lows. The market failed to win traction from the deal, which fell short of expectations and resulted from Easter weekend video-conference talks led by the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.

### Where are oil prices now?

In late afternoon European deals, international benchmark London Brent North Sea oil stood at \$31.04 per barrel, compared with \$34.36 last Thursday before talks began. US benchmark West Texas Intermediate crude meanwhile traded at \$21.81 a barrel on Tuesday, down from \$26.80. Both contracts had crashed late last month on virus-linked demand fears and a Saudi-Russia crude price war. WTI had slumped as low as just \$19.27 per barrel on March 30, when Brent had also nosedived to \$21.65 per barrel. Those levels were last witnessed in 2002. The collapse prompted top producers to tighten the taps to stop hemorrhaging precious oil revenues.

OPEC producers dominated by Riyadh, and their allies led by Moscow, thrashed out a compromise deal on Sunday to cut production by 9.7 million barrels per day from May. Yet traders remain doubtful over the impact because the cuts nevertheless fell short of expectations, amid fears over plunging demand on COVID-19 fallout. "The OPEC+ deal has received the underwhelming reception it deserves, frankly, with producers delivering right at the bottom end of expectations after days of talks," said OANDA analyst Craig Erlam. "This may be the largest ever cut but we are living through an unprecedented event and demand has fallen off a cliff."

Futures briefly bounced Tuesday after US President Donald Trump tweeted producers were considering cutting 20 million barrels per day. Influential Saudi energy minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman also indicated cutbacks by OPEC and its allies, together with pledges from other G20 nations and purchases by strategic reserves, could remove 19.5 mbpd from the market. "There is still a lot of uncertainty over whether the reduction in output will be enough," said Markets.com analyst Neil Wilson. "Most think OPEC and allies have not done enough to prop up prices in the near term, albeit they do seem to have shown a willingness to prevent a complete collapse."

## Social distancing needed...

Continued from Page 1

"What seems to be necessary in the absence of other sorts of treatments are intermittent social distancing periods," he added.

Widespread viral testing would be required in order to determine when the thresholds to re-trigger distancing are crossed, said the authors. The duration and intensity of lockdowns can be relaxed as treatments and vaccines become available. But in their absence, on and then off distancing would give hospitals time to increase critical care capacity to cater for the surge in cases that would occur when the measures are eased.

"By permitting periods of transmission that reach higher prevalence than otherwise would be possible, they allow an accelerated acquisition of herd immunity," said co-author Marc Lipsitch. Conversely, too much social distancing without respite can be a bad thing. Under one modeled scenario "the social distancing was so effective that virtually no population immunity is built", the paper said, hence the need for an intermittent approach. The authors acknowledged a major drawback in their model is how little we currently know about

Global oil supplies are currently outstripping global demand by as much as 30 million barrels per day, according to Alfa Energy chairman John Hall. "What we have to remember is that the supply-demand imbalance could be as high as 30 mbpd," Hall told AFP. "A recent figure from OPEC has warned of a figure of 14.7 mbpd, so this cut - although the largest ever - is probably not even half way to what is actually needed to supposedly rebalance the market."

Rystad Energy predicts oil demand will hit 28 million barrels per day (mbpd) in April and 21 mbpd in May. That is far below "normal" demand of 100 mbpd, according to Rystad. The IMF meanwhile forecast Tuesday that oil prices will likely remain below \$43 throughout 2023 due to "persistently weak demand" in a deep global recession sparked by coronavirus. However, the IMF did also admit that the rapidly falling cost of oil - which greases the wheels of the global economy - should nevertheless give a big boost to consumer nations.

### Will OPEC deal be respected?

Compliance among OPEC member nations over the cartel's production quotas has long been a controversial topic, analysts agree. "We should not forget how difficult OPEC found it to comply with the production quotas in the past three years," said Commerzbank analyst Eugen Weinberg. "In fact, compliance was achieved mainly thanks to involuntary production outages and over-compliance on the part of Saudi Arabia."

ING analyst Warren Patterson added: "The group has agreed on historic cuts, and now we have to see whether they will stick to them. Unlike previous deals, it is hard to see the likes of Saudi Arabia cutting output by more than their quota, in order to make up for shortfalls from others, given the scale that they have already agreed to cut."

### What next?

Many industry experts expect the global oil market will remain caught between plentiful crude and virus-ravaged demand for the foreseeable future. "With the coronavirus-led slowdown taking a toll on the global oil demand, the supply side news could be rapidly forgotten," said Swissquote Bank analyst Ipek Ozkardeska. "The historic cut did not spark the market reaction that oil producers were hoping for. Wide controversies among oil producer nations hinted that a further action is probably unlikely." — AFP

how strong a previously infected person's immunity is and how long it lasts.

At present the best guesses based on closely-related coronaviruses are that it will confer some immunity, for up to about a year. There might also be some cross-protective immunity against COVID-19 if a person is infected by a common cold-causing betacoronavirus. One thing however is almost certain: the virus is here to stay. The team said it was highly unlikely that immunity will be strong enough and last long enough that COVID-19 will die out after an initial wave, as was the case with the SARS outbreak of 2002-2003.

Antibody tests that have just entered the market and look for whether a person has been previously infected will be crucial in answering these vital questions about immunity, they argued, and a vaccine remains the ultimate weapon. Outside experts praised the paper even as they emphasized how much remained unknown.

"This is an excellent study that uses mathematical models to explore the dynamics of COVID-19 over a period of several years, in contrast to previously published studies that have focused on the coming weeks or months," Mark Woolhouse, an infectious disease epidemiologist at the University of Edinburgh said. "It is important to recognize that it is a model; it is consistent with current data but is nonetheless based on a series of assumptions - for example about acquired immunity - that are yet to be confirmed." —AFP

## Trump freezes WHO funds as...

Continued from Page 1

1930s Great Depression. Underlining the point, Europe's powerhouse, Germany, has been in recession since March, the government there said yesterday. The virus-hit Chinese economy, second only to the US in size, likely contracted for the first time in around three decades in the first quarter, according to an AFP poll of economists.

With tentative hope the pandemic could be past its peak in some European hotspots, many countries are gradually lifting restrictions - to mixed reception. Italy, one of the hardest-hit nations, allowed bookshops, laundrettes, stationers and children's clothing retailers to re-open, but many business owners chose to stay shut. "Open in a desert? Why? Opening a business where no one walks by is dangerous from every point of view," said Cristina Di Caio, a bookshop owner in Milan.

Spain has allowed work to restart in some factories and construction sites, Denmark opened schools yesterday after a month-long closure while Germany was expected to ease some lockdown measures. Also Wednesday, the European Union is poised to suggest a coordinated "road map" for member states to exit the lockdown.

Citizens elsewhere, however, braced for several more weeks of restrictions - including in India, whose 1.3 billion people will remain in lockdown until May 3 despite uproar from millions of unsupported poor. As the virus appeared to be on the retreat in some parts of richer Europe, it is slowly taking hold in Africa, which has seen 15,000 cases and 800 deaths continent-wide - with fears over growing hunger and possible social unrest.

"A lockdown is unenforceable and unsustainable across much of Africa," said Jackie Cilliers at the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies (ISS). "You are trying to do something that is not possible, and you are condemning people to a choice between starving and getting sick," he said. "It's not possible for 10 people living in a tin shack... to not go outside for three weeks."

A similar crisis is emerging in Ecuador, where hunger trumps fear of the virus for residents in run-down areas of the badly affected city of Guayaquil. "The police come with a whip to send people running, but how do you say to a poor person 'Stay home' if you don't have enough to eat?" said Carlos Valencia, a 35-year-old teacher.

However, in parts of the world that saw early outbreaks, things were gradually returning to some semblance of normal - South Korea headed to the

polls yesterday with a big turnout expected despite the disease. Examples of human resilience and generosity continued to lift the spirits. While a 99-year-old British World War II veteran raised millions for health workers by walking lengths of his 25-metre garden using a strolling frame, a man of the same age beat the virus in Brazil. "It was a tremendous fight for me, greater than in the war. In war, you kill or live. Here, you have to fight in order to live, and you leave this fight a winner," said Ermando Piveta.

Meanwhile, Bahrain has turned a car park near the capital Manama into an intensive care unit with 130 beds for patients infected with the novel coronavirus, in a first in the Gulf. The new ICU in the covered car park was set up as a precautionary measure in case of a spike in cases of the COVID-19 respiratory disease, officials said. The small Gulf country, whose population stands at 1.5 million, has recorded more than 1,500 cases, of whom seven people have died and 645 have recovered.

According to official statistics, only three people are currently in critical condition. "The new ICU is a precautionary step in case there are any developments," Sheikh Khalid bin Ali Al-Khalifa, the Royal Medical Services commander, told reporters at the inauguration on Tuesday. "We are able in record time, in seven days, to establish this unit with 130 beds... working day and night. This is the first time that such an equipped (temporary) unit has been established in the Gulf."

The Gulf emirate of Dubai is meanwhile setting up a field hospital in the World Trade Centre which once hosted events and business conferences to prepare for any potential surge of the virus. The hospital will have 3030 beds, 800 of which will be allocated to the ICU, according to Ali Abdalqader, director of engineering at the center. The United Arab Emirates has so far recorded more than 4,500 cases of coronavirus, including 25 deaths.

Bahrain's new ICU was set up by the defense ministry in cooperation with other government bodies, on the third floor of a military hospital which had served as a parking lot. The beds were lined up in three rows as medical staff tested respiratory equipment on Tuesday. Some 800 doctors and nurses have been training to deal with infected patients in critical condition since February, when Bahrain recorded its first cases, according to Nayef Lori, director of the ICU project.

Bahrain has taken strict measures to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, including restricting movement and halting all flights. The bridge connecting Bahrain with Saudi Arabia - which has the highest number of cases in the Gulf with nearly 5,000 infections - has been closed for weeks. Although many measures remain in place, Bahraini authorities loosened some restrictions last week by allowing some retail stores to open their doors. — Agencies







## Sports

## Photo of the Day



LATVIA: Pavel Petkuns, freerunning athlete, performs in Latvia. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

## NHL tells players to self-quarantine through April 30

**NEW YORK:** The National Hockey League, which suspended play on March 12 amid the coronavirus pandemic, on Tuesday extended its self-quarantine recommendation to players until April 30.

The league had previously advised players to stay at home until yesterday. The NHL said in a statement it was extending the guidelines "following consultation with our medical experts, as well as with representatives of the NHLPA".

The recommendation means team facilities will remain closed to players. It comes a day after NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said the league is continuing to explore multiple options for resuming play.

"When we'll have an opportunity to return depends on things that we have absolutely no control over, because it all starts with everybody's health and well-being," Bettman said. "And until there's a sense that people can get together, not just to fill our arenas but even our players to get together to work out, we don't know when we can come back."

"But it's something we're monitoring on a daily basis." He said the league believed players would need two to three weeks to prepare for a resumption of play once on-ice training could resume.

"As much as we may worry about keeping everybody, not just our players or the NHL family, but everybody, safe from the coronavirus, we also want to make sure that our players don't jeopardize their health by coming back too soon and not being in game shape," he said.

Bettman reiterated that the league was considering all sorts of possibilities, such as playing games without fans or at neutral sites. "So we haven't ruled anything in, we haven't ruled anything out, and we'll be prepared to go in whatever direction makes sense at the time." — AFP

# World Wars, doping scandals: The Tour de France has survived hard times before

## World's love affair with the Tour was sorely tested

**PARIS:** The coronavirus pandemic has thrown this summer's Tour de France into a state of frantic reorganisation, but the cycling epic has had to contend with testing situations over its 116-year history.

French President Emmanuel Macron's announcement on Monday outlawing mass gatherings until mid-July has left organisers scrambling to find a new start date for the 2020 edition originally scheduled to get underway in Nice on June 27.

Here AFP takes a brief look at some previous hurdles the Tour has had to negotiate in its more than a century long history:

### SHOTS AND SKULDUGGERY

In the Saint-Etienne region during the second edition of the race in 1904 supporters of local favourite Alfred Faure physically assaulted his rivals. Shots were fired to restore order in riotous circumstances. There was so much skulduggery going on the top four finishers were all disqualified. Henri Desgrange, the founder of the Tour, said at the time: "The Tour has been killed by the passions it has aroused".



### Testing situations

a stage before or since. However, in 1978 the first of a two-part stage was annulled when the riders themselves put their foot down and refused to continue over a lack of rest time, stopping just short of the finish line.

### DOPING

While France was celebrating winning the World Cup in 1998 cycling was struck in the heart by the so-called Festina doping affair when customs offi-

clared war on Serbia, setting the stage for the outbreak of the first World War. For the record Belgian Philippe Thys won the Tour that year, the last time it was held until 1919.

### 20 YEARS ON

The 1939 Tour embarked without the German, Italian or Spanish riders and avoided the north and the west regions altogether. It ended less than five weeks short of the declaration of war made by France and England on Nazi Germany. The Tour was not raced again until 1947.

### ROAD BLOCK

In 1982, some 300 steelworkers striking over job losses in the northern French town of Denain blocked the road for the team time-trial, causing the stage's cancellation. The Tour has been targeted many times by strikers but had never lost a stage before or since.



**NIMES:** File photo taken on July 23, 2019 France's Julian Alaphilippe (front centre), wearing the overall leader's yellow jersey and cyclists cross the Pont du Gard during the sixteenth stage of the 106th edition of the Tour de France cycling race between Nimes and Nimes, in Nimes. —AFP

cial stopped a vehicle laden with doping products. There was a media storm as police raids and arrests led to the Festina team being thrown off the race as the peloton staggered into Paris on a Tour that ended under a cloud and at one time looked unlikely to finish.

### PARIAH

The world's love affair with the Tour was sorely

tested in the ensuing years when cycling fell under the spell of US Postal's Texan rider Lance Armstrong, who won from 1999-2005. Armstrong was eventually stripped of his seven Tour de France titles after admitting to doping. The American is seen widely as a pariah not only because of the doping but also because of how he used his power and influence at the top of the sport to intimidate others whilst trying to keep a lid on the matter. — Agencies

## Ionescu to shine in WNBA draft

**NEW YORK:** Oregon's Sabrina Ionescu is set to seize the spotlight in Friday's virtual WNBA draft, as players and coaches stay behind closed doors amid the coronavirus pandemic that forced the postponement of the league's upcoming season.

Ionescu, the first NCAA player to score 2,000 career points, 1,000 rebounds and 1,000 assists, is all but assured to become the first overall pick, with the disciple of the late Lakers great Kobe Bryant set to become a force in the league.

"She's got everything you want in the skill set but the number one thing people talk about is her competitiveness and competitive fire," ESPN analyst and hall of famer Rebecca Lobo told reporters Monday. "That's the thing that can separate the great ones."

The guard is expected to land with the New York Liberty, who limped their way to a 10-24 record last season and are looking to rebuild at their new Barclays Center home in Brooklyn. Liberty head coach Walt Hopkins praised the 22-year-old for her "phenomenal" leadership skills.

"She's not somebody who just stands back and says what to do - she'll come down on teammates but it's in a way that's constructive and you can watch their body



Sabrina Ionescu

language as they take that feedback," Hopkins told reporters.

"It's not easy to be that type of a leader because you have to be doing everything you're saying in order to have the credibility." Her coronation will occur as much of the pro sports world is on hold and with the annual NCAA tournament wiped from the schedule last month, leaving one fewer opportunity for under-appreciated players to distinguish themselves.

"Usually this time of year, when we're talking to coaches or GMs, there's one or

two players who they talk about - their draft stock skyrocketed throughout the course of the NCAA tournament," said Lobo. "We didn't have a chance to see those players or have those experiences."

"There's always a player who can make her mark in big moments and we missed out on all of that." The Women's National Basketball Association earlier this month announced it would push back the start of its regular season, which was originally scheduled to run from May 15-Sept. 20 due to the coronavirus. — Reuters

## Kareem, one of NBA game's greatest stars

**NEW YORK:** Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is often overlooked in the debate over who is the greatest NBA player of all time as names like Michael Jordan, Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, LeBron James and Kobe Bryant dominate the discussion.

Abdul-Jabbar, however, undoubtedly deserves his place in the pantheon of the game's greats. His inscrutable nature, which led him to shun the spotlight early in his career, made it easy for some to discount his jaw-dropping on-court production. Yet when he retired in 1989 he had etched his name into Los Angeles Lakers folklore as the league's all-time leading scorer who won six championships and a record six MVP titles.

Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor Jr. was born on April 16, 1947 in New York City and, as a shy fourth grader, began practicing what would later become his unstoppable "skyhook" shot.

The 7-foot-2-inch (2.18m) center gained national recognition in college, where he scored 56 points in his varsity debut at UCLA en route to a 30-0 season and a national title. That led the NCAA to ban the slam dunk in an effort

to contain him.

The rule change only made him better, as he perfected the "skyhook" and won three consecutive national titles. In 1968 Alcindor stirred controversy when he boycotted the Olympic Games in an anti-racism protest, converted to Islam and privately changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, which means "noble one, servant of the Almighty".

He was selected first overall in the 1969 NBA draft by the Milwaukee Bucks and in his rookie season averaged an astonishing 29 points and 15 rebounds per game, an unthinkable feat for any first-year player in today's game.

In only his second season he led the Bucks to a championship, was named the league MVP and the finals MVP. Abdul-Jabbar was traded to the Lakers in 1975 and had one of the greatest seasons in NBA history in his first year with the team. He averaged 28 points, 17 rebounds and 4 blocks per game and won the MVP award despite the Lakers missing the playoffs that season.

Once paired with point guard Magic Johnson, the duo became one of the most electrifying tandems in NBA history as the "Showtime" Lakers made eight finals appearances and won five titles while dominating the league in the 1980s.

Abdul-Jabbar also became more outgoing, making a memorable turn as the co-pilot in the 1980 comedy "Airplane!" and appearing in other television shows and movies. — Reuters



## Sports

# Hammers boss Moyes fears injury pile-up if Premier League resumes

## MLS says mid-May return 'unlikely', season could be shortened

LONDON: West Ham manager David Moyes fears a rash of injuries to players should there be a desperate rush to complete the Premier League season if the coronavirus relents sufficiently to allow the resumption of football.

The Premier League has now ditched plans to get back underway at the start of May and a further complication is that a number of players will be out of contract in June.

It has been suggested that clubs may need to play up to three games a week in order to finish this season before the 2020/21 campaign gets going.

Moyes would prefer a four-week build-up on the training ground before the current Premier League season resumes, should lockdown restrictions be relaxed and the Hammers boss fears the consequences if, as seems likely, clubs have less preparation time.

"I think that four weeks would be ideal. But I think three weeks will be the maximum we get," Moyes told beIN Sports on Tuesday. "Everybody's now talking about the injuries we're liable to pick up either during the three-week preparation time or during the period where it looks like we'll have to play an awful lot of games in a short period of time."

West Ham are only above the relegation zone on goal difference but Moyes, in his second spell in charge of the east London club, was optimistic about their long-term prospects.

"I want to build a new, energetic, young team and I think we've just started that," said the 56-year-old Scottish boss. "With the signings we've brought in January, trying to freshen it up and given us a lot more



### Four weeks would be ideal

youthfulness and direction."

Major League Soccer said Tuesday it's hoped for return in mid-May looked "extremely unlikely," acknowledging it might not be possible to play its full season.

"Major League Soccer continues to regularly evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including how it will affect our plans for the 2020 season," the

league said in a statement.

"Although we hoped to return to play in mid-May, that is extremely unlikely based on the guidance of federal and local public health authorities. "Our goal remains to play as many games as possible, and while we currently have enough dates to play the entire season, we recognize at this time that it may become difficult to do so."

MLS suspended play on March 12 as the coronavirus pandemic was shutting down sports worldwide.

On March 19 MLS said it would remain suspended for eight weeks, which would have brought them back on May 10. With competition on hold indefinitely, the league has also imposed a training moratorium for all clubs, which was scheduled to last through April 24.

In an interview with ESPN, Garber said that moratorium would be extended "at least a couple weeks". Garber also said that MLS is exploring alternative formats for completing the season. "From tournament formats and neutral locations, ultimately playing an abridged regular season, but doing everything to get as many games," Garber said.

He said that if play does resume he thinks it would likely be without fans in what he called "MLS Studio" games. The commissioner said officials of the North



David Moyes

American league are monitoring their counterparts in England and Germany as they implement testing and training protocols amid the pandemic.

"We continue to learn more every day from the medical experts, and we expect to have additional details in the coming

weeks regarding when we can return to play," the league statement said.

"As we have throughout this process, we will update our fans with every decision, and we thank them for their support and understanding during this extremely challenging time." —Agencies

## Tsitsipas 'trying to learn' French during lockdown

ATHENS: Greek tennis star Stefanos Tsitsipas said on Tuesday the coronavirus pandemic lockdown has given him a chance to brush up on his French. The 21-year-old ranked sixth in the world has returned home with the global season on hold due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

"It's an opportunity to stay a little longer with my family and do things I didn't have time to do before," he said during an online chat with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

"Specifically, right now on a daily basis I'm trying to learn a little bit of French, it's something I've always wanted but I didn't have time to deal with and it's an opportunity now," Tsitsipas said.

Mitsotakis had a teleconference with outstanding Greek athletes such as Tsitsipas to thank them for their contributions in encouraging people to exercise at home while observing

the measures.

"We do have the opportunity to change habits and come out of this trial stronger. People will understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle and might even discover exercise again, even if at home, and even light jogging, things that are allowed under the circumstances," Mitsotakis said.

The premier said if April goes smoothly with measures against the illness, the gradual return to normalcy may begin in May, "which will include an increase in sports activities."

Greece's world number 20 Maria Sakkari thanked and congratulated Mitsotakis and his government for the positive results in the fight against the virus.

"We all understand that it is not easy, it is something very difficult, we are all grateful. I think I am speaking on behalf of everyone, it is something admirable that you have achieved,"



Stefanos Tsitsipas

24-year-old Sakkari said.

Olympic pole vault champion Katerina Stefanidi, 30, said things are very difficult and "the more we sit, the more it will take us to return to the normality

of things for us."

"We are in a difficult time from now on, but I think everyone is doing what they can at home, on the street, a little on the beach," Stefanidi added. — AFP

## Scottish football in limbo as Dundee delay drags on

GLASGOW: Dundee said Tuesday they were still not yet ready to cast what threatens to be a deciding vote on plans to cut short the Scottish season because of the coronavirus. According to the Scottish Professional Football League, the second-tier side gave an "unequivocal instruction" not to count their ballot after a technical problem held up the delivery of their vote ahead of a suggested deadline of 1600 GMT on Friday.

Soon afterwards, the SPFL released the results on a resolution that said the three lower leagues would finish in the positions they stood at when play was halted because of the pandemic in March. A decision on the Scottish Premiership would be taken at a later date if the first proposal was passed.

The Premiership and clubs in League One and Two have backed the plan with the required majority of 75 percent. But the Championship remains finely balanced, with seven clubs having voted for the plan and two against.

Following days of claim and counter-claim as to what

Dundee had done or meant to do, the Dens Park club said they were still undecided despite "positive discussions" about possible league reconstruction.

"Given our discussions and considering all aspects, we don't feel we are in a position to comment further on the resolution that was put forward," said a Dundee statement.

"We understand that this may bring more questions than answers and we will look to give a much more substantial account of the past few days at the conclusion of this process." Inverness chief executive Scot Gardiner said a Dundee representative had told several Championship rivals they had submitted a 'no' vote eight minutes before the suggested deadline. But SPFL chairman Murdoch MacLennan, in a letter written to clubs on Sunday and later released to the media, insisted he had been told by Dundee to disregard any such vote.

This saga could in fact drag on for three more weeks as regulations state clubs do in fact have 28 days to cast a ballot. Soon after Gardiner made his comments, Rangers, second in the Premiership behind leaders Celtic, urged that SPFL chief executive Neil Doncaster and legal advisor Rod McKenzie both be suspended, with the Glasgow giants accusing the league of "farical" conduct.

Rangers insisted Sunday clubs would be "shocked" to know the SPFL has the power to issue loans to cash-strapped teams. The league has repeatedly said the season must be completed before prize money can be distributed. — AFP

"During that period, as you might expect any business would, we have engaged in contingency planning. We thought about how we might be able to return in various scenarios but again the key is the improvement in the public health situation."

The 2020 MLB season was scheduled to open on March 26, but has been postponed amid the COVID-19 pandemic that has idled sports leagues worldwide.

In the meantime, ESPN reported Tuesday that MLB teams will take part in a "massive" study that will test up to 10,000 people for coronavirus antibodies, which could offer researchers a better sense of how widespread the disease is in major metropolitan areas in the United States.

Scientists involved told ESPN the study, which is being run by Stanford University, the University of Southern California and the Sports Medicine Research and Testing Laboratory, wouldn't necessarily hasten the return of the games.

But the tests, which rely on blood drawn via pinprick, can confirm if people had contracted coronavirus, even if they never displayed symptoms. Doctor Jay Bhattacharya of Stanford said MLB's speedy willingness to participate and the fact that they could marshal a wide range of people — from players and executives through concession workers — made them a solid partner in the study. — AFP

## MLB's Manfred says public health 'key' to baseball's return

LOS ANGELES: Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said Tuesday that the season won't open until officials are sure it won't be a detriment to public health.

Manfred, speaking on the Fox Business program "Mornings with Maria," said MLB officials continue to ponder a variety of scenarios for the resumption of sports in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

With so many unknowns, he said, they are more "ideas" than plans. "The only decision we have made, the only real plan that we have, is that baseball is not going to return until the public health situation is improved to the point that we're comfortable that we can play games in a manner that is safe for our players, our employees, our fans and in a way that will not impact the public health situation adversely," Manfred said.

"Right now, it's largely a waiting game," he added.

## Curran 'can't wait' to play under Dhoni amid virus threat

LONDON: England all-rounder Sam Curran said Tuesday he still hoped to play under India great MS Dhoni in the Indian Premier League — and get one over older brother Tom — despite the coronavirus pandemic.

Curran, 21, was the most expensive England player in November's initial IPL auction, being sold to the Chennai Super Kings, captained by Dhoni, for £590,000 (\$742,000) after a successful 2019 stint with the Kings XI Punjab.

Meanwhile the 25-year-old Tom, also of Surrey and England, was signed by the Rajasthan Royals. But the spread of COVID-19 has led to the suspension of all major cricket worldwide. This year's IPL was meant to start on March 29 before being delayed until Wednesday to coincide with the end of an initial Indian government lockdown.

But with Prime Minister Narendra Modi announcing Tuesday an extension of the lockdown — the world's biggest covering over 1.3 billion people — until May 3, there is no certainty about when, or indeed if, the 2020 IPL will take place. "No-one knows," Sam Curran told reporters in a conference call with Tom on Tuesday. "It (the IPL) might happen this year, it might be cancelled, but we have to follow the government guidelines."

Chennai are one of the IPL's most successful teams, having won the tournament three times before a dramatic one-run loss to Mumbai Indians in last year's final.

### 'CHENNAI LEGENDS'

"I was very excited to move franchises," said Sam. "Chennai is a great franchise with all the big names and I can't wait to play under MS Dhoni. "Hopefully I will play against Tom, hit him everywhere and then hit his stumps."

"Dhoni exudes calm," added Sam, who said only Virat Kohli, Dhoni's successor as India captain, could rival him in terms of superstar status in cricket crazy India.

"Chennai is quite an older squad so there are quite a few legends who have made it in the game," said Sam. "Hopefully they will be looking to give tips to the younger players, so that's something I'm really looking forward to."

Sam had been preparing for a "massive" three-month stint in Asia after being selected for England's tour of Sri Lanka, which was abandoned before the start of the Test series.

Tom insisted, however, the lack of cricket was "nothing in the grand scheme of things" even though it was a "shock to the system". Sam added: "But you have to appreciate the time off is quite refreshing."

"Hopefully I'm not one of the players who has let themselves go and comes back for the county season 10 kg too big."

The lockdown has seen several England players involved in charity initiatives, with Sam having raised nearly £10,000 for Britain's National Health Service, although he downplayed his efforts by saying "the smallest thing we can do is raise some money for the NHS".

The Currans live separately from one another and Tom, asked if he was missing seeing Sam, replied: "Nah, nice break. Only joking, of course I'm missing the man."

When cricket resumes the brothers, the sons of the late Zimbabwe all-rounder Kevin Curran, hope to fulfil a "dream" by following their Surrey predecessors Adam and Ben Hollis as siblings playing Test cricket in the same England side. — AFP

## IPL cricket made to wait as India extends lockdown

NEW DELHI: India's cricket board remains optimistic about playing the lucrative IPL later this year, a team official told AFP yesterday, as an extended national lockdown left the competition in limbo.

In line with other sports events worldwide, the 13th edition of the Indian Premier League, the world's richest Twenty20 tournament, had already been pushed back from its original start date of March 29.

Officially it was postponed until yesterday but with India and much of the world in lockdown, preventing players from travelling and fans attending matches, the tournament remains on hold.

After India extended the lockdown on Tuesday, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) told the eight franchises that the tournament has been deferred indefinitely.

"Yes, they have informed us that the IPL stands suspended for the moment," a team official told AFP on condition of anonymity. "However it is said that they will find a window in the later end of the year to do it."

There was no announcement on the IPL's future from the Indian board. At the weekend, BCCI president Sourav Ganguly had shied away from giving a prediction.

"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.

Foreign stars have been pushing for an IPL start with Australia's Steve Smith saying he hopes the league will be held "at some stage".

Former cricketers including England's Kevin Pietersen have suggested the glitzy tournament be shortened from its normal eight-week duration and played behind closed doors. — AFP



**18** World Wars, doping scandals: The Tour de France has survived hard times before



**18** Ionescu to shine in WNBA draft



**19** Tsitsipas 'trying to learn' French during lockdown



## Asian football tournaments to go ahead



ARSTA: AC Milan's Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic (R) attends a training session of Swedish league team Hammarby IF at Arsta IP on April 13, 2020 in Stockholm. — AFP

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Asia's top football competitions will go ahead this year despite the coronavirus pandemic, a senior official told AFP, although games may have to be played behind closed doors.

Windsor John, general secretary of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), said he was confident that the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup would both be completed. Both tournaments, featuring teams from throughout Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, are on hold until at least the end of June after COVID-19 shuttered professional sport worldwide. "Both will be played this year. We still have time," John told AFP, adding that new dates for the competitions may be known by the end of April. However, John did not rule out matches being played without fans "if that's what the health authorities need". The AFC is determined for both tournaments to go ahead "for sporting reasons and to fulfil commercial obligations", he said. His comments came after the AFC on Tuesday announced the indefinite postponement of all matches scheduled for May and

June due to the virus.

The Champions League, the region's premier club competition, and the second-tier AFC Cup were both halted in March as the pandemic's spread forced governments to impose strict travel restrictions. Both tournaments are on an increasingly tight schedule, with the 32-team Champions League needing to complete four rounds of group-stage matches in July before the postponed knock-out phase begins in August.

The group phase of the AFC Cup will also have to be completed in a rush once matches resume. The finals for both tournaments — which traditionally take a break in July, to avoid the worst of the Asian summer heat — are scheduled to take place in November.

Domestic leagues remain on hold around the

world, including in China where the virus first emerged, but where football shows no sign of returning despite optimism the outbreak is under control.

Asia's extended shutdown, announced on Tuesday, also affects the two-legged women's Olympic qualifying play-off between China and South Korea, which had already been moved to June 1 and 9.

The region's premier club competition was put on hold in March as the pandemic spread, and the latest reshuffle means the 32-team group stage will have to be completed in July before the already-postponed knock-out rounds start a month later. "Following the continued preventive measures and travel restrictions put in place by several governments, the Asian Football Confederation has decided today to postpone all matches and competitions scheduled to take place in May and June

until further notice," an AFC statement said. "As one of the first confederations in world football to undertake precautionary measures in light of the COVID-19 outbreak, the latest decision reinforces the AFC's commitment to ensure the safety and wellbeing of players, participating teams, officials, fans and all stakeholders."

Less than two of the six rounds of group-stage matches have been completed so far, meaning the competition will face severe congestion even if it returns in July.

The extended shutdown also affects the two-legged women's Olympic qualifying play-off between China and South Korea, which had already been moved to June 1 and 9. June qualifiers for the men's 2022 World Cup and 2023 Asian Cup had already been postponed.

Football was one of the first sports affected by travel restrictions prompted by the coronavirus, which has now forced the blanket stoppage of professional sporting events worldwide.— AFP

## 'Essential' WWE resumes live broadcasts

**MIAMI:** World Wrestling Entertainment, a US media group whose wrestlers body-slam their opponents into oblivion, has resumed live broadcasting of bouts after gaining "essential services" status in Florida.

With sports and entertainment events shut down worldwide amid the coronavirus pandemic, WWE wasted no time after Florida's emergency management director confirmed it provided an essential service — along with hospitals, firefighters, grocery providers and mental health care workers.

A memo sent Friday, based on an executive order from governor Ron DeSantis, confirms essential services now include "employees at a professional sports and media production with a national audience - including any athletes, entertainers, production team, executive team, media team and any others necessary to facilitate including services supporting such production - only if the location is

closed to the general public." On Monday, WWE aired a live episode of its weekly series "Raw" from its Orlando production facility.

"As a brand that has been woven into the fabric of society, WWE and its Superstars bring families together and deliver a sense of hope, determination and perseverance," the company said in a statement, adding that it would take "additional precautions" to guard the health and safety of performers and staff.

WWE's move could conceivably open the door for other sports in Florida. Even before the order, Major League Baseball was reportedly mulling a plan to hold regular-season games at training facilities in Florida and Arizona in a bid to get the season delayed by the pandemic underway.

Ultimate Fighting Championship, the mixed martial arts organization that has been trying in vain to find a venue to stage a fight amid virus lockdowns, owns event space in Florida.

UFC boss Dana White was thwarted in his bid to hold UFC 249 without fans on April 18 at an undisclosed location, reportedly a Native American tribal reservation in California.

The move met with resistance from California Senator Dianne Feinstein and White said that he finally postponed the event at the request of broadcasters ESPN.— AFP

“ We still have time ”

## Possible Saudi takeover of Newcastle closer

**LONDON:** A potential takeover of English Premiership side Newcastle by a Saudi Arabian-backed group appeared to move closer on Tuesday after legal documents were lodged with the UK's regulator of companies.

But several other proposed bids to buy the club from Mike Ashley have all come to nothing during the controversial British businessman's 13 years as owner of the northeast side. Those include a 2017 proposal put forward by Amanda Staveley's PCP Capital Partners, who are the firm involved in the latest possible purchase.

Documents filed at Companies House last week came to light on Tuesday, with the papers providing a framework for talks between PCP and Ashley. In January, Ashley was reported to be in talks to sell Newcastle for £340 million (\$429 million), with

the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund putting up most of the cash.

The Wall Street Journal suggested the Saudi group, led by Staveley and backed primarily by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's wealth from the oil-rich state, had been in discussions with Ashley for around four months.

While there is no mention of any Saudi participation in the latest Companies House documents, the involvement of Britain's billionaire Reuben brothers, David and Simon, has been recorded.

After the collapse of Staveley's highly-publicised previous takeover bid three years ago, Ashley insisted all such future negotiations would take place in private.

A Saudi purchase of Newcastle would be a major development in the state's increasing involvement in sport that has seen it stage the recent world heavyweight title between Anthony Joshua and Andy Ruiz and announce plans for a new Formula One racetrack that will host a Grand Prix in 2023.

But critics have accused Saudi Arabia of 'sports washing', saying the government is using sport as a way of distracting attention from its human rights record.— AFP