

Friday Times

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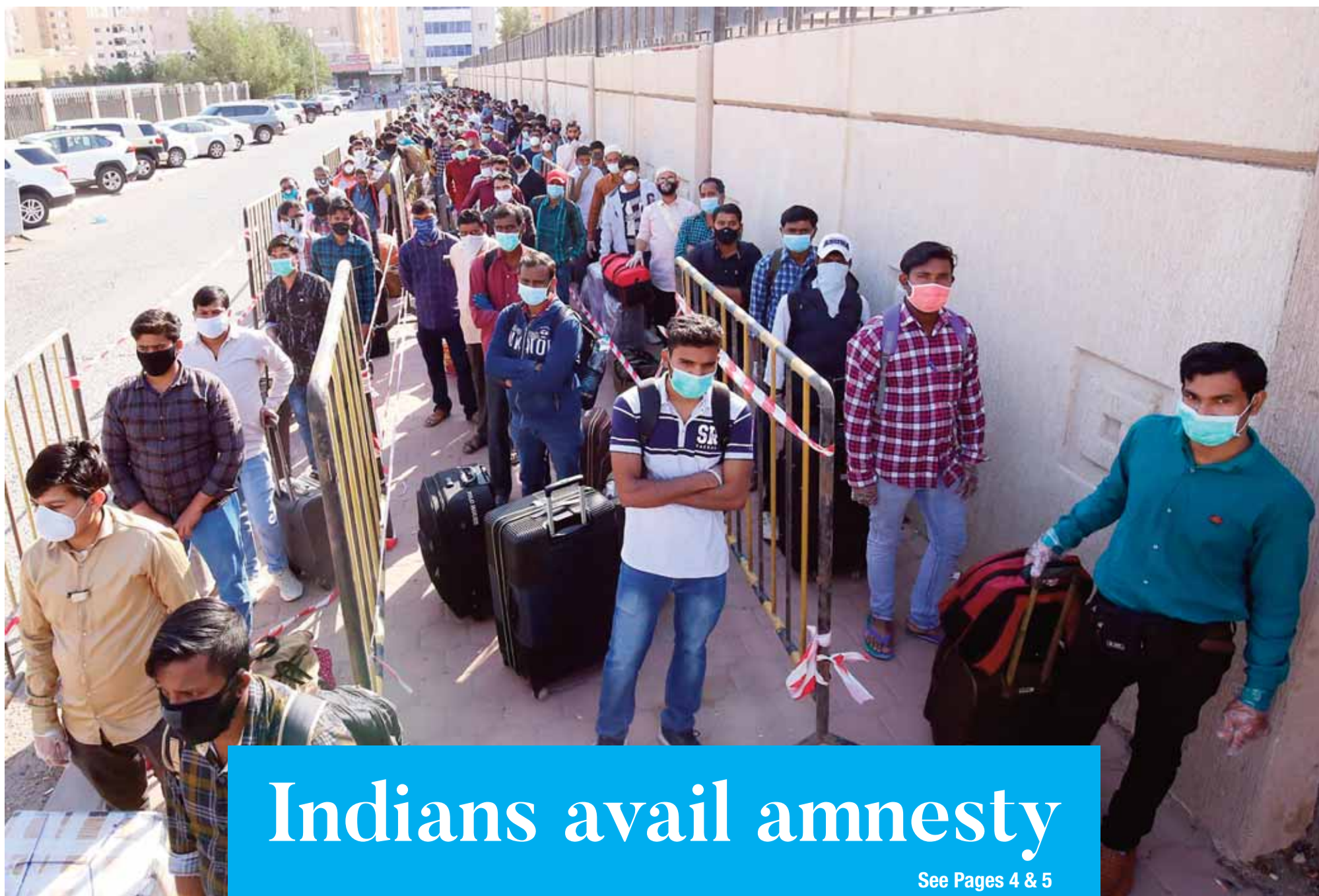
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Local

Resilience and hope for tomorrow

Pandemic Diaries

By Jamie Etheridge

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Yesterday I read an interesting article in Vox.com on flower resilience by author Brian Resnick. The article discusses research recently published in the scientific journal, New Phytologist on the ways flowers recover from injuries. Ecologists Scott Armbruster and Nathan Muchhala spent years collecting data from all over the world that examines how some flowers will reorient their petals after an injury to ensure they may be pollinated by bees.

I won't go into the full study (read it here: <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2020/4/14/21208857/pandemic-plants-evolution-beauty>) but it highlights the resilience of nature, the beautiful and wonderful ways in which flowers and plants come back from unexpected or unplanned injuries to thrive.

The moral is apt for today and Vox writer Resnick



Pandemic creates opportunity to rebuild

draws the parallels to the current pandemic and the need for resiliency in troubled times such as these. We are all facing an unprecedented global pandemic that could have lasting and lengthy implications for our financial future, our health and our societies as a whole. Drawing on our innate resiliency to get us through the present and coming challenges will be key to our survival and to a thriving future.

I would like to add, also, that along with resiliency, we also need a hope and a belief that our collective future can be better. If nothing else, this pandemic has illustrated in stark relief the foundational injustice and inequity of our economic, health and education systems. These systems have grown too predatory, too exploitative for the vast majority and as a result, despair and disengagement with these systems has also grown exponentially.

Bernard Beckett writes in his novel, *Genesis* that "human spirit is the ability to face the uncertainty of the future with curiosity and optimism. It is the belief that problems can be solved, differences resolved. It is a type of confidence. And it is fragile."

To overcome this fragility, to build a future that is sustainable and can weather any storm, systems must provide hope for all. The pandemic will create an opportunity to rebuild communities and systems that are more inclusive, more fair and equitable for all.



KUWAIT: Bread and other basic necessities were distributed to Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh residents on Wednesday as the area remains under total lockdown as part of efforts to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Complete curfew

Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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Reports are rife these days about the possibility of imposing a full curfew in the country. So far, nothing is confirmed, and I am only making my opinion. I personally oppose a total curfew because I believe that it will not stop the infection. I also think it will add extra pressure on us all without reaching its goal, which is to ensure social distancing and limiting gatherings. Here's why.

The Cabinet has instructed specialized teams to prepare the necessary requirements to set up plans to deal with a comprehensive curfew in all areas of the country in case the decision is officially issued. With this report, many questions emerged, such as how citizens and expats will get their food and medicine. I hope that someone does not say that the online service is enough, because it is not, and possibly with the full curfew, deliveries will stop as well. Moreover, I don't think the need is only about food or getting medicine from the pharmacy.

For example, for several days I have been trying to communicate with a food company here and no one is answering the phone. The lines are all busy from 7 am until 4 pm, so if this is the case during the partial curfew, then what about the total one? I am also wondering what the goal of a total curfew is. How many days would it take if approved - two or three days or a week? What is its goal? If it is to prevent the spread of infection, then it is better to focus on

areas with marginal laborers or residency violators, because they gather in large numbers and the probability of infection is high. But to target the whole country - this I cannot agree or support.

Also, if the state can provide online services to deliver food to citizens, what about expatriates, especially poor families and construction workers? All these questions are important to the public and should be taken into consideration. I know that there are supporters of the ban, while others are against it. Everyone has their own opinion and I am only giving my view.

Especially since a total curfew means closing all areas and isolating them from each other, and not allowing moving between the areas throughout the day and only not during specific hours. I wonder what will be the mechanism by which food, medicine and other needs will be delivered to citizens and expats. Who will bear the costs of providing food in sufficient quantities to expats who may not have enough money? Is it possible to impose a total curfew on all areas without expecting security, health and social problems?

Since the implementation of a complete curfew in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, we have seen some attempts to break the law, as well as chaos in receiving food and not committing to staying at home. In my view, a total curfew is unhelpful and will only put more pressure on everyone.

Experiences around the world confirm one fact - that neither a partial or total curfew will stop the virus. People's commitment to following health directives and guidelines and working to educate with media campaigns in various languages about the importance of taking all medical tips seriously and dealing with infected cases as they occur until we have a vaccine or treatment will end the virus.



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Indians start five-day period to avail amnesty

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Indians in Kuwait kicked off yesterday their scheduled five-day grace period in availing amnesty granted by the Kuwaiti government to all nationals from April 1-30. Many undocumented Indian nationals flocked at the amnesty processing venue in both Farwaniya Primary School for Girls and Al-Muthana Primary School for Boys. Kuwait Times captured in video the long queue of amnesty seekers almost encircling the huge compound of two schools adjacent to Farwaniya Police Station. Undocumented Indians have until April 20 to apply for the amnesty, and they must carry their belongings. Once their applications are approved, they will be immediately transported to a reserved holding area as they wait for their flights back

to Delhi. Those who availed amnesty can leave the country without penalty plus a chance to come back if they wish to re-apply for a new visa.

Sunil who is from Hyderabad, India is one of those who stood in the long queue yesterday trying to avail amnesty. "I've been in Kuwait for a long time, about two years, without a visa and working in Shuwaikh as a car painter," he said. "Now I want to go home and come back to Kuwait later. I was a driver for a Kuwaiti family before and I left because I only got KD 100 salary per month. My friend helped me get the job in Shuwaikh, and thank God because I got more than double the salary. I want to work legally, so I took advantage of this amnesty."



Local

Friday, April 17, 2020



Approved amnesty applications can leave Kuwait without spending any fees as Kuwaiti government has earlier promised to cover the amount of airline tickets for all the approved amnesty takers. The Ministry of Interior has earlier scheduled the grace period for which each nationalities are given five days each to complete the process for the amnesty application. Sri Lankan nationals are up next from April 21-25, followed by applicants from all other nationalities from April 26-30. Bangladeshi nationals applied from April 11-15, Egyptians from April 6-10 and Filipinos from April 1-5. Over 7,000 residency violators applied in first ten days alone, according to the Interior Ministry.

Violators are received from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm at the following locations: Male violators are received at Al-Muthanna Primary School for Boys, Farwaniya, block 1, street 122, while female violators are received at Farwaniya Primary School for Girls in Farwaniya, block 1, street 76. Residency violators from all nationalities are also received in two difference locations in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh as follows: Female violators are received at Roufayda Al-Aslamaya School - Block 4 - Street 200, while male violators are received at Naem bin Masod School - Block 4 - Street 250.



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

Zain supports Kuwait National Counseling Program for COVID-19

Interactive online platform to serve mental wellbeing during crisis

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its support to the National Counseling Program for COVID-19 (Corona Care Kw), a volunteer program that offers a free online interactive platform for mental health support to the Kuwaiti community during the exceptional circumstances to fight the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Kuwait.

Zain's support to this volunteer initiative came as part of the company's commitment towards the nation during this crisis and in line with its comprehensive corporate sustainability and social responsibility strategy. Zain was keen on reflecting the Kuwaiti private sector's role in supporting volunteer efforts exerted by Kuwaitis to shoulder the country's tremendous efforts in protecting the health and stability of the nation.

Zain supports this program by offering free lines to the program's team to facilitate their communication and coordination, as well as sending free bulk SMS messages to the public to introduce the program and spread its cause. Zain also supports the program by posting its goals on the company's official social media channels to reach the biggest number of people and contribute to the mental wellbeing of the community as much as possible.

The National Counseling Program for COVID-19 (Corona Care Kw) offers an interactive online platform to serve the mental wellbeing of people in Kuwait during the current exceptional situation. The program offers two main means of support; the first being through recorded content produced by experts in their fields who address frequently asked questions related to mental health during the pandemic. The second is one-on-one virtual consultations to three priority segments: doctors and medical staff working in the frontlines, people who tested positive with COVID-19, and people who are currently in institutional quarantine.

All the services offered by the program are executed and supervised by a team of mental health experts. The initiative's team includes over 900 expert volunteers, including over 70 counselors. The program follows standards that are adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO), and can offer a capacity of over 300 sessions per week to offer the required results and contribute to supporting anyone who may need mental support during this crisis.



As part of its national commitment during this crisis, Zain recently offered nearly 30,000 meals in collaboration with the Kuwait Food Bank, where a large number of the meals was distributed during the week dedicated by the Ministry of Health at Kuwait International Fairgrounds in Mishref to conduct tests for residents who recently entered the country. The meals were a contribution by the company to ease the long waiting times while waiting in line. Many meals are also being continuously distributed at Kuwait International Airport's gates dedicated for residents who are returning to their countries because of this crisis.

Zain also offers many smartphone charging stations at Kuwait International Airport to serve Kuwaiti citizens who are returning home as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' evacuation plan to bring Kuwaitis back home from all over the world during this crisis. This contribution aimed at facilitating communication between returning Kuwaitis and their families as soon as they arrive to Kuwait. Zain is also continuously distributing a large number of meals to them in collaboration with the Kuwait Food Bank and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

As part of its commitment to the nation during this crisis, Zain recently announced offering free Internet caps and local voice calls for a period of one month in collaboration with the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA). The initiative came as part of the company's commitment towards its customers during these exceptional circumstances. Zain also changed its network's name to stay home in line with the directives of the Council of Ministers to remind

its valued customers to commit to staying at home as much as possible and contribute to ending this pandemic together.

The company also launched a social media campaign entitled "This is Your Time" to send positive messages to the public about the importance of being a responsible citizen in this time of crisis, not listen to rumors nor spread them, take part in volunteer efforts, commit to staying at home, as well as abiding by the authorities directives.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Zain collaborated with the Ministry of Health to offer its customers free calls to any of MOH's three hotlines; 24970967, 96049698, and 99048619 in order to enable them to inquire about any health or medical information related to coronavirus disease (COVID-19) directly from the ministry's specialized team and ensure taking the correct information from the official and certified sources.

As part of its continuous collaboration with the various ministries, Zain also provided the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior with FREE bulk SMS messages to send medical and awareness content to the community during this period. In addition, the company sent a number of awareness messages in collaboration with MOH's team through its official social media channels. Zain also broadcasted official MOH awareness videos on coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in seven languages: Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Farsi, Filipino, Bengali, and Santhali.

Zain affirmed its utmost commitment in all the instructions and precautionary measures outlined by the Ministry of Health to contribute to fighting the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Kuwait. Zain supplied all its branches that are operational during the official break, as well as all its kiosks and self-service machines in all of Kuwait's areas with sanitizers, and the company's team continuously and periodically sanitizes all operational branches and all machines and products to ensure the safety of customers and staff. Zain also notified all sales staff to wear medical gloves, stop the use of biometric devices, and more. Zain also launched an internal awareness campaign for the safety of its employees, through which the company distributed precautionary items and sanitizers to all staff and sent periodic awareness content.



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Local

Kuwait sought no help to deport illegal residents: UN

UN, IOM officials visit temporary sites housing amnesty takers

KUWAIT: Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Resident Coordinator in Kuwait Dr Tarek Al-Sheikh refuted reports that the Kuwaiti government asked the UN to step in and help deport violators of the residency law to their respective countries. He expressed full confidence in the approach of the government of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah to strengthening the country's new vision for humanitarian action and rule of law.

Kuwait's 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.

Dr Al-Sheikh made the remarks in a press release on Wednesday following a visit by Chief of Mission of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iman Ereiqat and Head of Office of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Samer Haddadin to one of 12 temporary dwelling sites of illegal residents in Kuwait. He applauded the

relentless efforts made by the Kuwait government to naturalize the illegal residents in accordance with the rules and standards of the Ministry of Interior with a view to alleviating their suffering from the malpractices of "human traffickers." Dr Al-Sheikh echoed Haddadin's statement during his tour that Kuwait did not seek UN intervention in the deportation of violators of residency law "who can by no means be called refugees."

"The State of Kuwait proved to be a humanitarian country of justice and law while addressing the crisis of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19)," the senior UN official said. Dr Al-Sheikh noted that the joint IOM-UNHCR team were accompanied by Kuwait's Acting Assistant Foreign Minister for Human Rights Affairs Talal Al-Mutairi and head of the repatriation taskforce Maj Gen Abdin Al-Abdin during their visit to the temporary housing of illegal residents at Tareq Al-Sayed Rajab Middle School for Boys in Sulaibikhat Area. "Such sites were designated

for housing the violators of residency law who opted voluntarily to return to their home countries," he said, noting that these persons were provided with all services during their temporary stay, including sleeping rooms, clinics and three meals a day, in keeping with international standards. "The State of Kuwait has set the end of April as a deadline for the violators of residency law to leave voluntarily without having to pay any fines or travel ticket fares," Dr Al-Sheikh pointed out.

Meanwhile, Ereiqat lauded as trailblazing Kuwait's efforts to address the affairs of violators of residency law in a humanitarian manner. "Once again, the State of Kuwait proves to be a true center of humanitarian action," she said, taking pride in the partnership between the IOM and Kuwait in carrying out this project pursuant to the best international practices. On the combat against COVID-19, the IOM representative said Kuwait made its utmost to contain the spread of the pandemic without affecting the vulnerable

people, particularly the low-income expatriates and temporary workers.

In the meantime, Haddadin said Kuwait's handling of the illegal residents' affairs overmatched the international standards relating to such cases. On behalf of the UN Refugee Agency, he thanked Kuwait for its leading humanitarian role and the decisive steps to stem the tide of COVID-19 from the very beginning. Haddadin expressed hope for Kuwait to continue playing a pioneering role in combating the pandemic through prevention of crowded dwelling of law-abiding expatriates and addressing the file of violators of residency law humanely. — KUNA



Dr Tarek Al-Sheikh

KNPC builds centers for 7,000 workers

KUWAIT: Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) announced yesterday that it has started preparing three temporary centers, spread into various parts in the country, and dedicated to accommodate about 7,000 workers. KNPC Deputy Chairman of Projects and the official spokesman for the company Abdullah Al-Ajmi said that the company's initiative comes in response to cabinet's directives and in the framework of contributions by the oil sector companies in supporting the state's efforts to address the outbreak of coronavirus. Ajmi added the company has received from the Ministry of Public Works the three sites designated for the establishment of these centers in each of Al-Ardiya, Al-Jahra, and South Al-Sabahiya areas, indicating that they are currently being equipped and provided with the basic facilities and services necessary to be able in the coming days to receive this large number of workers and provide suitable living conditions. The spokesman noted that the initiative comes also from a humanitarian standpoint and reflects the company's keenness to support the efforts of the government and its agencies to limit the spread of this virus. — KUNA

Emergency wards for coronavirus

KUWAIT: Kuwait has set up four new emergency wards in only five days as part of extraordinary measures to cope with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The 20-bed units have been hurriedly established at Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital, Al-Adan Hospital, Al-Farwani Hospital and Al-Amiri Hospital, the health ministry's assistant undersecretary Ibrahim Al-Naham said on Wednesday. They were built for coronavirus cases, according to instructions by Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah. — KUNA



KUWAIT: A field hospital was set up in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh to receive area residents for novel coronavirus (COVID-19) tests, and provide necessary care for those who test positive. The area has been put under total lockdown along with Mahboula as part of efforts to curb the spread of the disease. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Local

Kuwait steps up pressure on visa traders amid coronavirus

Kuwait reports 119 new COVID-19 cases, total tally at 1,524

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The government has stepped up measures to crack down on visa traders, already arresting two major traders and sending them to court while other agencies have launched search campaigns to improve living conditions of low-paid expat workers.

Head of the Public Manpower Authority Ahmad Al-Mousa said yesterday that a high-level government committee headed by Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh has been assigned to combat visa traders, especially those who establish paper companies and use

them to recruit expat workers against expensive fees.

The committee has already identified two key visa traders and sent them to court. The first one, with more than 1,300 workers under his sponsorship is in detention along with his Egyptian partners awaiting trial. The committee identified another trader after finding that 577 workers have been illegally sponsored by them. Saleh ordered authorities to use security deposits made by the company for pay for the air tickets of the workers.

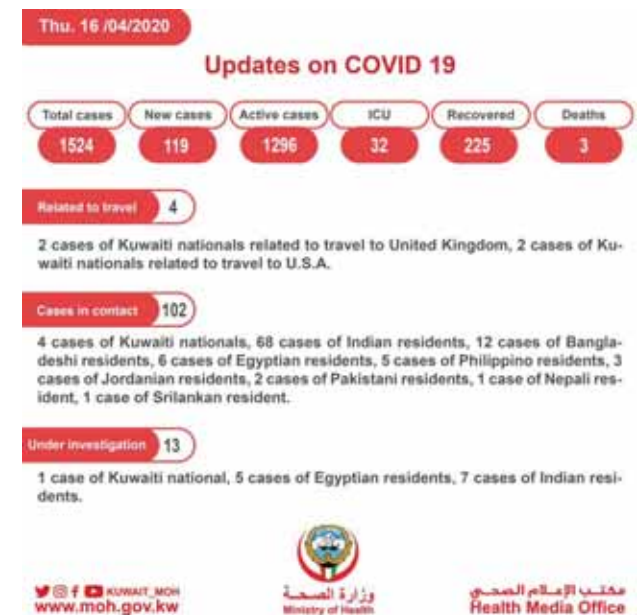
Mousa said that authorities will likely publish the names of people and companies found involved in trafficking in persons only after they are convicted by court. Visa traders are blamed for recruiting hundreds of thousands of unskilled expat laborers who are battling dire living conditions with large numbers crammed in one room that has become very unhealthy at the time of coronavirus.

The campaign coincides with a steep rise in the number of coronavirus cases among expat workers, who now make up more than two-third of the 1,405 cases reported by Kuwait, which forced authorities to lock down Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, home to more than half a million expats.

The manpower authority has conducted search campaigns on workers housing in several areas to ensure that healthy conditions are strictly implemented to prevent the spread of the virus and to apply the law. According to the law, a maximum of four workers can stay in a room of at least 16 square meters in area. In practice many more are forced by their employers to stay in much smaller rooms.

In the meantime, Kuwait's National Human Rights Commission called in a statement to activate accountability and supremacy of the law in dealing with trafficking in persons' crimes which have come under the spotlight because of the coronavirus.

The statement called on authorities to treat all expatriates on humanitarian basis and preserve their dignity until conditions become appropriate for them to go back to their home countries.



News in brief

Co-op worker tests positive

KUWAIT: A worker at a Surra Co-op Society branch tested positive for novel coronavirus (COVID-19), the society posted on its Instagram account yesterday. The branch, located in block 2 in the area, is closed until all workers get tested, the society confirmed.

Expat flights

KUWAIT: The Directorate of Civil Aviation (DGCA) announced Wednesday that it operated flights to Germany and Qatar allowing expatriates to leave Kuwait back to their home countries. A DGCA press release said that the first flight was onboard a 90-seat Al-Jazeera airways aircraft to Frankfurt. A 72-seat plane onboard Qatar Airways was the second operated flight, it added.

Curfew violations

KUWAIT: Police arrested 19 curfew violators on Wednesday, including 12 expats and seven Kuwaitis, the Ministry of Interior announced. They include 10 in Farwaniya, four in the Capital, three in Hawally, and two in Mubarak Al-Kabeer.

Fake news

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Information launched yesterday a website (<https://tahaaq.media.gov.kw>) to check fake news, calling people to check any news before publishing.

Quarantine budget

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Finance denied news about the costs of furniture in the government's quarantine. It explained that it requested an approximate KD 10 million budget as an estimated framework for the cost of signing all contracts with companies to prepare quarantines.

577 workers victims of trafficking

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh said on Wednesday combating human trade and residency law violators are "related to national security and demography." There is high level government coordination in this regard to monitor and clamp down on companies and all who have a hand in these offenses, he warned. In line with cabinet designation, a special task force has been formed to gather data, information and lend support for legal measures against culprits behind presence of "ghost labor" and fight residency traders, as well as for taking preventive measures against such offenses. One busted company is owned by a citizen, he said, adding that it had a file of more than 2,000 laborers and 577 workers who breached the residency law and had

been blackmailed by the company, he said. Saleh indicated at coordination with the Minister of Social Affairs, Minister of State for Economic Affairs Mariam Al-Aqeel pending measures by the Public Authority for Manpower to liquidate financial insurance presented by the company to the authority or the bank insurance to cover costs of extraditing the offending workers. — KUNA



Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh

Temporary visas for people with expired ones

KUWAIT: Deputy Premier, Interior Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh issued a ministerial decree to grant those in violation a three month temporary visa starting March 1, valid until May 31, 2020 online in coop-

eration with the IT and communications sector as follows:

- 1- Residents present in the country whose residencies of any type expired.
- 3- Those who entered the country with entry or visit visas of all types, that expired.

The sponsor or employer should correct the status of the violator who is granted the temporary residency online, by completing the process of the residency given previously through the interior ministry website: www.moi.gov.kw.



For Balkan Roma, 'hunger' is the first curse of COVID-19

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Treatment of Africans in China sparks diplomatic backlash



DOHA: Employees of Qatar Aviation Services (QAS), wearing protective gear as a safety measure during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, walk along the tarmac after sanitizing an aircraft at Hamad International Airport in the Qatari capital Doha. — AFP

Qatar flies to the rescue

Qatar Airways crews win plaudits as virus halts aviation

DOHA: Qatar Airways' crews have been applauded by passengers and won praise from governments for repatriating thousands of travelers stranded by the coronavirus aviation shutdown. Observers say Doha is hoping that by carrying on flying when regional competitors are grounded, it will score diplomatic points in an ongoing confrontation with its neighbors. The Gulf state has drawn on the logistics baptism of fire it endured in 2017 when its erstwhile regional allies abruptly sealed borders and airspace to Qatari travelers and trade, in a damaging blockade that forced it to adapt and innovate.

While Qatar Airways is only operating 35 percent of its normal services, it has used spare capacity to carry 17,000 people on almost 60 special charter services for countries with stranded citizens. Germany, France and Britain have all publicly directed citizens to fly home on the Gulf airline and praised Qatar on social media. In one post, the French embassy in Sydney posted images of its citizens flashing victory signs and giving the thumbs-up as they checked in for their flight from Perth to Paris. Qatar Airways has also evacuated US diplomats and other nations' foreign service staff from Iraq.

"It serves Qatar's image as a connector and

go-between... bring(ing) material and people to where it is needed," said King's College London assistant professor Andreas Krieg. "It scores diplomatic points and reiterates how important it is for the rest of the world to provide Qatar with access to airspace and freedom to fly," he added. However, there was criticism of the airline on social media at the start of the month from travelers stuck in New Zealand that the only flight option for those not on a special repatriation flight was a \$10,000 business fare.

'Lifeline'

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain cut all ties with Doha in 2017, accusing it of backing "terrorists" and being too close to Iran—charges Qatar denies. Talks to mend the rift have stalled, after a flurry of diplomacy late last year raised hopes of a breakthrough. "This is a clear message to partners to (help) lift the air blockade on Qatar," Krieg said of the national carrier's role during the pandemic, which Doha says has enabled one million people to return home.

While other Gulf airlines—including Abu Dhabi's Etihad, Dubai's Emirates and Kuwait Airways—were quick to ground their fleets to save costs, Qatar kept both passenger and cargo

routes flying where restrictions permitted. Chief strategy officer Thierry Antinori said Qatar Airways saw "the duty of the company to be a lifeline between Asia and Europe, between also Asia and America, to help people to go back home".

"We are making charters, not just flying to existing cities, to pick up passengers who are stranded for the French government, for the German government—including to cities Qatar Airways is not usually flying to," he said. Social media has delivered valuable publicity for a country that is still pushing ahead with building stadia and infrastructure for hosting the 2022 World Cup, even during the coronavirus lockdown. A video went viral of stranded French citizens applauding their repatriation flight crew, while a British minister tweeted his relief that 45,000 citizens had flown home with Qatar Airways.

Cargo pays

With far fewer people flying on those flights still in the sky, Qatar Airways has begun to load more cargo into its planes' passenger baggage holds—partially offsetting lost ticket revenues. "Cargo pays for the aircraft and really it keeps the wolf from the door," said Thomas Caufield, head of the airline's cargo terminal operations.

"Where you might have 20 tons normally, now you can do 60 tons using the passenger baggage hold," Caufield said in Doha's vast cargo terminal.

In the days after the Saudi-led economic boycott began, Qatar was forced to airlift everything from dairy cattle to seafood to stop shelves going bare. Kristian Ulrichsen, author of "Qatar and the Gulf Crisis", said the embargo had "given Qatar's leadership experience in adapting rapidly to a fast changing situation and to making contingency plans". But like many airlines, the carrier has warned it will need state aid after several years of losses blamed on the regional boycott.

Alongside the airline, which transported 50,000 kilograms of medical supplies and coronavirus aid last month, Qatar's airforce has also put on a charm offensive, delivering two field hospitals to Italy—a country ravaged by the pandemic. But Qatar's efforts have not been universally welcomed. A bizarre row erupted after Doha publicized its rescue of Bahrainis from Iran who were then accommodated in Doha. Khalid Al-Khalifa, diplomatic adviser to Bahrain's king, thundered on Twitter that Qatar "exposed (the Bahrainis) to great danger" and accused Doha of "interfering". —AFP

International

Netanyahu and Gantz miss unity deal deadline, deadlock persists

Impasse raises prospect of fourth election

TEL AVIV: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his main rival Benny Gantz missed a midnight deadline to reach a unity government deal but agreed yesterday to continue talks. Even the medical and economic crises brought on by the coronavirus outbreak have so far failed to end an unprecedented political deadlock that has pushed Israel into three inconclusive elections in the last year, and perhaps now a fourth.

Gantz and Netanyahu have been negotiating a power-sharing deal that would keep the right-wing premier in office for another 18 months, Israeli media reported. Under the arrangement, centrist former general Gantz would take over after that. Gantz, a relative newcomer to politics, was given the first chance to put together a government after the most re-

cent election, in March. President Reuven Rivlin, who is overseeing the talks, said on Monday that progress justified his decision to grant Gantz a two-day extension to hash out a deal with Netanyahu.

But Gantz's mandate expired at midnight on Wednesday after a last-minute attempt by the two leaders' envoys to clinch a deal. That complicates plans for economic recovery once the coronavirus outbreak is brought under control, and the country's stringent lockdown is eased. Without a deal, it will be up to parliament to pick a candidate who would then have 14 days

to form a government. Failure to do so would automatically dissolve parliament and trigger a snap election. Netanyahu and Gantz released a

joint statement early yesterday saying they would continue negotiations later in the day. Talks technically can continue until parliament is formally dissolved.

Gantz had previously said he would not serve in a government led by Netanyahu, who is facing indictment on corruption charges but denies any wrongdoing. The trial is due to begin next month. But the enormity of the coronavirus crisis prompted Gantz to break his campaign

promise and to consider a deal, a move that angered many of his anti-Netanyahu supporters. The outcome appeared to weaken Gantz while strengthening Netanyahu, whose caretaker government is overseeing the country's response to the coronavirus crisis.

A Monday poll from Israel's Channel 12 news said that if an election were held now, Netanyahu's Likud party would see a four-seat boost to 40 in the 120-member Knesset, while Gantz's weakened Blue and White party would win only 19. The poll also found that some 64% of citizens were satisfied with Netanyahu's handling of the pandemic. Israel has reported over 12,500 COVID-19 cases and at least 130 deaths. Restrictions have confined most Israelis to their homes, forcing businesses to close and sending unemployment to more than 25%. — Reuters



Rivals negotiating unity deal to battle coronavirus

Al-Aqsa muezzin echoes 500 yrs of family tradition

JERUSALEM: As the rising sun gently begins to illuminate Jerusalem's golden Dome of the Rock and the city slowly awakens, Firas Al-Qazzaz's hypnotic voice echoes softly through the Old City. He is the latest member of his family in 500 years to lead prayers from the minaret at the cherished Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. "Allahu akbar (God is greatest)," begins the call rising over the mosque compound, not jerky or abrupt but smooth like honey, calling the faithful closer to God. "When you pull someone from sleep to prayer at dawn, take him kindly," Qazzaz said, explaining the different tones for the five daily Islamic prayers.

The site, where Muslims believe the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) travelled on a winged horse before ascending to heaven, lies in the heart of Jerusalem's Old City, home to places holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. The global outbreak of the novel coronavirus means the cobbled streets leading to the compound, normally heaving with life, now lie eerily quiet. The mosque may be closed and empty but Qazzaz's call can be heard echoing above the silence of a city in lockdown.

Unimpeded by car horns or noisy cafe chatter, his voice soars upwards clear and crisp amid sweet birdsong. Standing straight and with a slow, deliberate way of speaking, the 32-year-old is the youngest muezzin, or religious official who sounds the call to prayer, at Al-Aqsa. In happier times after prayers, Qazzaz would pick his way slowly through the



JERUSALEM: Muezzin Firas Al-Qazzaz, who calls Muslims to prayer, poses for a picture in front of the Dome of the Rock mosque at Al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem's Old City. —AFP

streets, greeting all those around—a handshake here, an "Asalamu aleikum" ("Peace be unto you") there, an invitation to join another for an Arabic coffee scented with cardamom.

'A beautiful voice'

"It is an honor from God that this family has been blessed with beautiful voices to be able to call the prayer in the Al-Aqsa mosque," he told AFP in a friend's house, where the walls are adorned with china whirling dervishes and a clock decorated with a picture of Mickey Mouse. His ancestors moved from Hijaz in modern-day Saudi Arabia to take up the mantle as the mosque's muezzin in the 15th century, and since then the family has passed the title from generation to generation. His father held the prestigious post for more than 40 years and Qazzaz

himself never dreamed of anything else. He shadowed his father from a young age—learning the call to prayer and how to breathe properly while reciting the Koran. At 14, he first asked his father if he could recite the Islamic call to prayer.

"The weather was cold—there was snow. I was afraid anyone would hear me, because Al-Aqsa has an awe of prestige," he said. "It is not easy to stop and read and call the prayers. But I called the prayer." "The head of the Waqf (the religious organization that runs the mosque) asked 'who was that?' My father said 'that was my son.' He said 'he has a beautiful voice, but it is still weak.'" To hone his talent, the young Firas went to train in a private institute in Jerusalem before spending a year in Cairo at the Al-Azhar mosque, learning from an Egyptian master, Sheikh Mohammed al-Masri. — AFP

From Baghdad mosques, calls to pray echo - but don't quite match

BAGHDAD: Centuries after Islam's historic schism crystallized in Iraq, Sunni and Shiite muezzins in its capital chant subtly different calls to prayer—just a few minutes and streets apart. The staggered, lilting appeals blanket the western Baghdad neighborhood of Rahmaniya, thanks to Shiite muezzin Mullah Muntadhar and his Sunni counterpart Ahmad al-Azzawi. "Sunnis come for our holidays, and we go to their mosques for theirs. There's no difference between us," Muntadhar said, wrapping up the call to prayer at the Abu Salawat mosque. Their calls have more in common than not, but a few key differences may be missed by the untrained ear.

Azzawi, from the Hajji Rashid Daragh mosque, rises before dawn and issues the Sunni call to prayer five times a day. Muntadhar and other Shiite muezzins begin a few minutes later, and only chant for three out of the five prayer times—dawn, midday and sunset. The Shiite calls also include two additional phrases. One refers to Imam Ali who, as the fourth Islamic caliph and relative of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), is among the most revered figures in Shiite Islam and is buried 200 kilometers (120 miles) south of Baghdad in Iraq's Najaf.

The lands of present-day Iraq saw the rise and fall of pre-Islamic civilizations, including Babylon and Sumeria, and then became the stage for crucial episodes of Islamic history. In 680 AD in Karbala, the Sunni-Shiite split hardened when the army of Yazid killed Mohammad's grandson Imam Hussein and his followers—an event commemorated today by Shiites around the world. From 762 to 1258, Baghdad was the capital of the Sunni Abbasid caliphate and witnessed a golden age, particularly under Caliph Harun Al-Rashid. In Iraq's more recent history, under Saddam Hussein and his Sunni-led regime, public Shiite pilgrimages were banned. Saddam was toppled in 2003 by a US-led invasion, bringing leaders from the country's Shiite majority to power and ushering in a period of greater religious activism on their part. — AFP

International

Deep connection: Virus takes India's spiritual retreats online

Religious rituals are being performed behind closed doors worldwide

NEW DELHI: At a remote hillside retreat in northern India, Tibetan Buddhist nun Tenzin Drolma usually holds intimate, face-to-face classes—but since the coronavirus pandemic forced them online, her lessons have been packed with people seeking inner peace under lockdown. Drolma had expected around 100 students to join her free video course, the usual size of drop-in sessions at the meditation centre that is closed because of the pandemic.

So she was surprised when more than 1,000 people from 57 countries signed up, a fifth of whom had no experience with Buddhism. The Chicago-born teacher told AFP she tries to set up her laptop in the prayer hall at Tushita Meditation Centre to be as

similar as possible to a real-life lesson. "I think that makes it as real as when I have actual people there," she said from the retreat in Dharamsala, the home of the exiled Dalai Lama.

India, the world's second-most populous nation with 1.3 billion people, is under a nationwide lockdown until at least May 3 to combat the

spread of the COVID-19. Some 6,000 kilometers away in Norfolk in eastern England—also under lockdown—one student is sitting on the floor with her eyes closed. "It really helps me to sort of get out of my own head a little bit," said Emma Roache, who calls herself a transformational coach. "Just to find that peace and breathe and know that I'm not alone," said Roache, who had to cancel a trip to India in March after the pandemic hit.

Calm in anxious times

Religious rituals are being performed behind closed doors worldwide, with mosques, churches and other spiritual sites closed and the Pope even live-streaming his Easter blessing. Along the sacred

India under a nationwide lockdown

River Ganges, as a light breeze blows and birds fly past in the background, instructors from Parmarth Niketan ashram lead yogis around the world in sun salutations and other postures. The centre in Rishikesh, a city in the Himalayan foothills renowned as the world centre of yoga, is also closed and is holding live sessions online.

Haram - Hala Sultan in Turkish, a female companion of the Prophet Mohammed - had long been the centre of Islamic life in Cyprus.

But it was not until 2003 that crossings resumed between north and south, following United Nations-backed talks. And only in 2008 did Alemdar return to Hala Sultan, after moving from London back to Cyprus. He found the complex had been restored as a museum, its original purpose as a place of worship consigned to the past. "They were advertising it as a tourist attraction," he said. "Ok, it's a nice place to see - for me it's the nicest place to see (in Cyprus) - but the emphasis that this is a place of worship was ignored."

'We're not fossils'

As a representative of the Mufti of Cyprus, Alemdar has made it his life's work to restore services to Hala Sultan Tekke and other abandoned mosques, patiently winning over Greek Cypriot bureaucrats. "Turkish Cypriots are alive and we're not fossils," he recalls telling one official. Cyprus joined the European Union in 2004, but Alemdar says Turkish-speaking Cypriots have been unable to claim their full rights as EU citizens because most of them live in an unrecognized breakaway territory. "We are part of this island life for the past 500 years," Alemdar said. "We are not outsiders." Alemdar himself lives in southern Nicosia. Today, of 100 mosques on the island in areas controlled by the Republic of Cyprus, Alemdar said "only eight are operational and (Islamic religious authorities) are only administering half of them because of political issues". — AFP



DHARAMKOT: Buddhist teacher Tenzin Drolma leads a live online course for meditation at the Tushita Meditation Centre for Buddhism studies from the Tibetan Mahayana tradition in Dharamkot. —AFP

Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, who lives at the ashram, is hopeful its spiritual practices will help people feel "grounded". "We realized that we need to give as much as we can to our global

community to keep them healthy physically, stress-free, anxiety-free," Saraswati, a Californian who settled in Rishikesh 25 years ago, told AFP from the ashram. — AFP

Cyprus imam revives historic Islamic sites

LARNACA: Like the pink flamingos that winter on the salt lake nearby, most worshippers at the Hala Sultan Tekke mosque in Cyprus have travelled from afar. The fact they are praying at the pilgrimage site at all is largely thanks to Shakir Alemdar, a Cypriot imam determined to revive key Islamic places of worship on the divided Mediterranean island.

"For the Turkish Cypriots, this place has great meaning," he told AFP. "Everyone has a love for this place." The cheerful 51-year-old grew up in the capital Nicosia and recalls visiting the most holy Islamic site in Cyprus, near the southeastern city of Larnaca, as a child. But shortly afterwards, in 1974, an Athens-backed coup aimed at unification with Greece sparked a Turkish invasion of the northern third of the island. Greek Cypriots, mostly Orthodox Christians, fled south.

Majority-Muslim Turkish Cypriots took refuge in the north, which later broke away as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Ankara. The division cut off congregations on both sides from hundreds of key religious sites, including the Saint Barnabas monastery in the north and Hala Sultan Tekke in the south. The mosque, built in the 18th century on the site of a tomb believed to belong to Umm

Group recital of prayer call 'runs in the blood'

DAMASCUS: Inside the Syrian capital's Great Umayyad Mosque, six muezzins sit before a loudspeaker, collectively reciting the call to prayer that can be heard across the ancient quarters of Damascus. They are among 25 muezzins who take shifts intoning the azan, or call to prayer, in groups, using a technique of collective recital that is unique to the centuries-old mosque. The place of worship was closed in mid-March as part of measures to stem the novel coronavirus pandemic that Damascus says has infected 29 people, two of whom have died—but its calls to prayer live on. Mohammad Ali al-Sheikh, the eldest of the muezzins, said the tradition runs in his blood.

"I come from a long line of muezzins," the man in his eighties told AFP. "I have been a muezzin for 68 years, as was my father until he died." Muezzins may have day jobs or be retirees but are all selected for their extraordinary voice. Sheikh was drawn to the role as a child, encouraged by his father's colleagues who complimented him on his voice, one he now cherishes as a gift from God. "God prepares the muezzin with a voice, one that is gifted to him, to elevate God's word," he said.

In a room inside the mosque, a picture of the sacred Kaaba, Islam's holiest site in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, hangs near framed verses of the Koran holy book. Sheikh raises the call to prayer,

with five other muezzins chanting along in unison, using the technique known as Al-Jawq. It yields a unique sound when it rises from the Umayyad Mosque, which sends out the azan from three towering minarets overlooking the capital.

'Rhythm and rules'

Built in the eighth century, the Umayyad Mosque has long drawn in worshippers near the Damascus centre's Hamidiyah souk, or bazaar. Before loudspeakers were installed in the 1980s, groups of muezzins used to recite the call to prayer directly from the minarets, Sheikh among them. Amplifying their voices so they could be heard across Damascus, they also raised a red ball to alert other muezzins in the city to join the call to prayer, Sheikh said.

There are many accounts of how the group call to prayer started at the Umayyad Mosque but its muezzins say that it was born out of a need to reach as many worshippers as possible. In his book, "The Great Mosque of Damascus", architect and writer Talal Akili said the technique originated in the late 15th century as a way to inform Muslim pilgrims converging on the city en route for Mecca that it was time to pray.

With decades of experience, Sheikh is among the muezzins qualified to grant certificates to pupils training to recite the azan. "The muezzin's voice must first be beautiful and loud, and after that, he must learn to recite and intonate," Sheikh said. A certificate is granted when a pupil masters the "rhythm and rules of the call to prayer", he added. A nephew of Sheikh, Abu Anas, is also a seasoned muezzin, having recited the call to prayer every day for 10 years. — AFP

International

Police thy neighbor: COVID-19 fears fuel quarantine shaming

Testing the line between civic duty and intrusive surveillance

WASHINGTON: Some complain about joggers panting on passers-by. Others wonder what to do when they overhear drunken partygoers rejecting quarantine measures. Still more question whether people they see in the street are really on “essential” business. Local social media networks, long places for recipe swaps and restaurant tips, are rapidly becoming sites where neighbors police neighbors during the global coronavirus pandemic.

And as users test the line between civic duty and intrusive surveillance - often trying to shame their peers into obeying social distancing rules - experts worry that a practice once frowned upon is becoming normalized. “It distresses me greatly to see a few uncaring louts who scoff at the safety rules that are meant for all of us to get through this awful situation,” said one user on a listserv for a wealthy suburb of the capital Washington, which has seen a slew of complaints about people ignoring distancing guidelines.

“I have a suggestion - if you see such behaviors as mentioned above - why not take photos/videos of the offenders? This could discourage their dangerous behaviors,” said another. Online shaming is nothing new - and neither is neighbors keeping tabs on one another - but never in history have so many people had such a high stake in enforcing social rules, or such a fast and accessible platform on which to do so.

“There is a sense that if you do it you can save lives... With COVID-19, we’re scared and there is an urgency to enforce the social distancing rules. Shaming is really one of the only tools we have,” says Dr Emily Laidlaw, an associate professor at the University of Calgary who studies privacy law and online shaming. Examples are rife on platforms such as Nextdoor, a hyperlocal social media network which demands users post under their real names and verify their locations.

“My neighbors are all drunk and having a party next door. One of them went on a loud tirade near my door that another month of quarantine is stupid and that he wasn’t going to do it,” posted one frustrated resident of a middle class west Los Angeles neighborhood recently. “You need to report them when it’s happening because that just means another month for us to be indoors,” another user replied.

Public shaming is against community guidelines and comments deemed as falling into the category will be removed, according to the app. It also touts the Kindness Reminder, a feature

announced last year to keep conversations respectful, and which has been modified in recent weeks with language specific to COVID-19. Wicca Davidson, who runs a listserv for a municipality in Maryland, says that since the pandemic began she has seen an uptick in complaints about behavior. “We don’t want to give a few people the ability to derail the use of the listserv,” she told AFP.

Being so judgmental

“There’s definitely social shaming. That’s part of what’s working to stay home,” 31-year-old Divya Sonti, an employee of IQ Solutions, which specializes in public health communications and health information technology, told AFP. Privacy expert Laidlaw also believes

such policing can be effective. But “there is a cost that should be acknowledged - casualties who are taken down by this unfairly, and the normalization of neighborhood surveillance,” she said.

One member of the Washington suburb listserv echoed her fears. “I sympathize with the concern but becoming a police-state type of community isn’t healthy,” the user wrote. “This is

not ok to take picture of people and post them,” another person wrote on a Nextdoor group in Los Angeles, after a user posted photographs of people they felt were walking too closely together. “What is next? Train to Dachau?”

Laidlaw said policing and shaming were already on their way to being normalized online before the pandemic, noting that “shaming sites are not new, nor are neighborhood watch/surveillance sites”. But until now, she says, there was also strong condemnation of public shaming. “I worry when the dust has settled, what was once contentious will be the new normal.” That is problematic because of the lack of context online, and the speed at which such condemnation can spread.

For example, in Brooklyn, one neighbor complained on Nextdoor about seeing a group of people in the street - a group which another user said was likely from a local substance abuse meeting. The sentiment is also echoed in one of the many viral Facebook posts calling for compassion at a time when so many are already struggling to cope. “Do you ever think maybe that guy buying a gallon of paint knows he must keep busy because idle hands in the past has caused him to relapse and pick up that case of beer?” it reads. “I know we are all on edge but please stop being so judgmental of others.”—AFP

For Balkan Roma, ‘hunger’ is the first curse of COVID-19

TIRANA: Inside a dark shack outside Albania’s capital, 18-year-old Mirela tries to soothe her newborn with the only food she has: a can of powdered milk scrounged from a rubbish bin. “But what to do after that?” the young mother asks, as she cradles her baby in the ramshackle home she shares with a dozen others on the outskirts of Tirana.

For Mirela and hundreds of thousands of other Roma living in slums across the Western Balkans, the first symptom of the coronavirus pandemic has been hunger.

Curfews and other lockdown measures have wiped out income for families who live hand-to-mouth, often by selling scraps of plastic and metal scavenged from bins. Now that business is on hold, piles of waste are festering in Mirela’s neighborhood, shrouding it in a putrid odor.

“Everything is blocked, we don’t have anywhere to sell (the recyclables) and for food we also have to go through the garbage to find



TIRANA: 48 year-old Lindita Vogli poses showing her family lunch leftovers, inside her house in Breglumas village near Tirana. For hundreds of thousands of Roma living in slums across the Western Balkans, the first symptom of the coronavirus pandemic has been hunger. —AFP

something to eat, like pasta and rice,” said 15-year-old Vanesa Lika, another teenage mother living in the shantytown in Breglumas. The community of around 40 Roma are still going out daily to collect bottles and cans in hopes that business will soon resume - even though they fear contamination from rummaging through other people’s waste. “We know that (the bottles) can carry the virus but there’s nothing we can do,” said Mirela’s mother-in-law, Lindita Vogli. “Poverty forces you to try everything.” —AFP

Pastor dies of COVID-19 amid church controversy

SANTIAGO: An evangelical bishop has died of COVID-19 in Chile after presiding over a service attended by hundreds of people, as criticism mounts against those keeping churches open. Mario Salfate, 67, died late Tuesday in a Santiago hospital after being admitted on March 23 “when he tested positive for COVID-19,” hospital officials said. A week earlier the pastor had presided over a service that drew around 300 people to his church in Paine, outside Santiago.

Three other evangelical pastors who participated in the service later tested positive for the coronavirus. Salfate’s death comes amid growing controversy in the South American country over insistent calls from evangelical pastors to maintain religious gatherings in defiance of coronavirus-related restrictions. Authorities are anxious to curb

church gatherings which are being held in defiance of rules mandating that non-essential businesses remain closed.

Chilean authorities have also implemented a nightly curfew as well as a selective quarantine in areas with a high incidence of infection and have placed an emphasis on controlling the pandemic by mass screening. So far, more than 8,000 people have tested positive, with more than 90 deaths. Images posted on social media showed dozens of people, including children and the elderly, attending a service last weekend in a Santiago suburb, during which no one wore masks or took other precautions.

Health authorities said another evangelical pastor held a service in Santiago knowing he was infected with the coronavirus. Prosecutors have charged him with failing to respect an obligatory quarantine for all positive cases. One prominent pastor meanwhile called on his followers to congregate, urging them to “not stay at home like a band of cowardly rats hiding in their lair.” The evangelical movement has taken root across traditionally Catholic Latin America, and the churches in Chile - where Catholicism was hit by a series of sex abuse scandals - claim three million members. —AFP

Trump threatens to adjourn Congress to allow him to appoint top officials

Move could trigger a legal fight between White House and Congress

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump threatened on Wednesday to take the unprecedented step of adjourning Congress to allow him to appoint top officials whose nominations he claimed were being blocked by Democrats in the Senate. "I will exercise my constitutional authority to adjourn both chambers of Congress," Trump told reporters at a press conference in the Rose Garden of the White House.

"I'd rather not use that power," Trump said of a move that would likely trigger a legal fight between the White House and Congress. "We'll probably be challenged in court and we'll see who wins." Trump accused Democrats in the Senate of stalling the nominations of several top administration officials whose appointments require hearings and Senate confirmation.

He said some of the vacant positions needing to be filled were vital to the response to the coronavirus epidemic which has left more than 27,000 people dead in the United States.

Past presidents have made what are known as "recess appointments" when Congress is not in session, and Trump said he may adjourn the Democratic-majority House of Representatives and the Republican-led Senate to allow him to fill vacancies. Although both the House and Senate have not been meeting amid the coronavirus pandemic they have not formally adjourned, and have been holding what are called pro forma sessions.

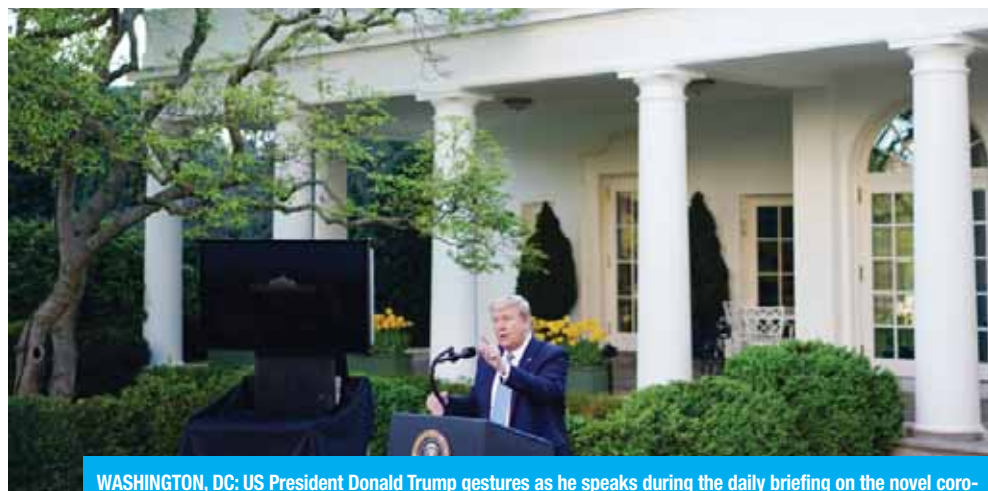
They are scheduled to return in formal session on May 4. "The Senate should either fulfill its duty and vote on my nominees or it should formally adjourn so I can make recess appointments," Trump said.

"If the House will not agree to that adjournment I will exercise my constitutional authority to adjourn both chambers of Congress," he said. "Perhaps it's never been done before," Trump added. "But we're going to do it. We need these people here," he said. "We need people for this crisis, and we don't want to play any more political games."

'Obstruction'

Trump spoke on Wednesday with Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate Majority leader, McConnell's office said. "Leader McConnell had a conversation today with the president to discuss Senate Democrats' unprecedented obstruction of the president's well-qualified nominees and shared his continued frustration with the process," McConnell's office said. But the Senate Majority Leader's office noted that confirmation of top administration appointees required the consent of Senator Chuck Schumer, the Democratic Senate Minority Leader.

"(McConnell) pledged to find ways to confirm nominees considered mission-critical to the COVID-19 pandemic, but under Senate rules that will take consent from Leader Schumer," McConnell's office said.



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Donald Trump gestures as he speaks during the daily briefing on the novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19, in the Rose Garden of the White House on Wednesday in Washington, DC. —AFP

Article II, Section 3 of the Constitution gives the president the power to adjourn the House and Senate if they cannot agree between themselves on when to adjourn.

Among the vacancies Trump cited as needing to be filled was the director of national intelligence, two nominees to the Federal Reserve Board and a senior post in the Department of Agriculture. Trump also complained that the Sen-

ate had yet to approve his nominee to head the body which has oversight over the Voice of America broadcasting network, which he accused of saying "disgusting things towards our country." Trump's nominee for director of national intelligence, Congressman John Ratcliffe of Texas, has not yet appeared before the Senate Intelligence Committee, the first step before his nomination would be sent to the Senate floor. —AFP

Gates Foundation calls on vaccine for 7 billion people

WASHINGTON: The wealthy Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation called Wednesday for global cooperation to ready COVID-19 vaccines for seven billion people, while offering \$150 million toward developing therapeutics and treatments for the virus. While it is likely to take as many as 18 months to develop and fully test a safe coronavirus vaccine, global authorities and businesses need to start now on plans to manufacture it, said foundation chief executive Mark Suzman. "It's normal to have, at maximum, hundreds of millions of doses manufactured," he said. "When you are dealing with a novel pathogen like COVID-19, as and when we get to identifying a successful vaccine, we are going to need billions of doses." "There are seven billion people on the planet," he said. "We are going to need to vaccinate nearly every one. There is no manufacturing capacity to do that." Suzman announced the foundation, started and controlled by mega-billionaire Microsoft founder Bill Gates and his wife Melinda Gates, is adding \$150 million to the \$100 million it announced in February to help in international efforts to battle the coronavirus pandemic. Much of the money is to support the development of COVID-19 diagnostic tests, therapeutic treatments and vaccines, and to make them globally available, he said. Some is also for helping the poorest countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which lack supplies, equipment and infrastructure to counter the new epidemic. —AFP

US funding freeze blows hole in WHO budget

GENEVA: The United States' funding freeze blows a major hole in the World Health Organization's budget as it attempts to steer the fightback against the coronavirus pandemic. Washington is the biggest single contributor to the United Nations' health agency.

However, US President Donald Trump announced Tuesday that he was putting the funding on hold, pending a 60- to 90-day review into the WHO's role in "severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus". Trump claimed the COVID-19 outbreak could have been contained "with very little death" if the WHO had accurately assessed the situation in China, where the virus broke out.

Its epicenter is now the United States, where the death toll has climbed above 26,000, with more than 600,000 infections. Worldwide, the pandemic has killed more than 130,000 people and infected at least two million, according to an AFP tally.

Trump said US taxpayers provided between \$400 million and \$500 million per year to the WHO, while "in contrast, China contributes roughly \$40 million a year and even less". It added to last week's charge from Trump that the WHO was "very China centric" despite Washington's heavy funding.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a press conference on Wednesday that he regretted Trump's decision. "WHO is reviewing the impact on our work of any withdrawal of US funding and will work with our partners to fill any financial gaps we face," he added.

The WHO budget

The WHO's finances are organized in two-year cycles. The WHO's budget for the 2018 and 2019 two-year bracket was \$5.62 billion, of which \$4.3 billion

was in specified voluntary contributions, according to figures now updated until the fourth quarter of 2019.

Looking at the specified voluntary contributions that have been fully distributed is one way of making comparisons between the contributions of donors to the WHO. In this sector, the United States is the biggest contributor with \$553.1 million, or 14.67 percent of the total specified voluntary contributions that ended up being fully distributed. The money, which can often be highly earmarked for particular projects, is paid out throughout the year as projects and needs arise.

The next biggest contributors are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (9.76 percent), the GAVI vaccines alliance (8.39 percent), Britain (7.79 percent) and Germany (5.68 percent).

They are followed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (5.09 percent), the World Bank (3.42 percent), Rotary International (3.3 percent), the European Commission (3.3 percent) and Japan (2.73 percent). China's contribution of \$7.9 million amounted to 0.21 percent of the total—behind Luxembourg (0.3 percent) and Pakistan (0.36 percent).

Assessed contributions

Assessed contributions are the dues countries pay to be a WHO member. They are calculated relative to the country's wealth and population and payable as of January 1.

At \$957 million in the last budget cycle, assessed contributions are the second-biggest tranche of the WHO's funding. The United States contributed \$237 million, nearly 25 percent of the total. China contributed \$76 million, or eight percent of the total.

"China speaks extensively to African countries in particular, to position itself as a defender of a more equitable new world order," said Alice Ekman, the senior Asia analyst at the European Union Institute for Security Studies. "The WHO is only one multilateral structure among others; China's influence is significant within the UN system—and it's not just about its financial contribution," she told AFP. —AFP

US says China may have conducted low-level nuclear test explosions

State Dept report could rekindle US-Chinese tensions

WASHINGTON: China may have secretly set off low-level underground nuclear test explosions despite claiming to observe an international pact banning such blasts, the US State Department said in a report on Wednesday that could fuel US-Chinese tensions.

The finding, first reported by the Wall Street Journal, may worsen ties already strained by US charges that the global COVID-19 pandemic resulted from Beijing's mishandling of a 2019 outbreak of the coronavirus in the city of Wuhan. U.S. concerns about Beijing's possible breaches of a "zero yield" standard for test blasts have been prompted by activities at China's Lop Nur nuclear test site throughout 2019, the State Department report said.

Zero yield refers to a nuclear test in which there is no explosive chain reaction of the type ignited by the detonation of a nuclear warhead. "China's possible preparation to operate its Lop Nur test site year-round, its use of explosive containment chambers, extensive excavation activities at Lop Nur and a lack of transparency on its nuclear testing activities ... raise concerns regarding its adherence to the zero yield standard," the report said, without providing evidence of a low-yield test.

Beijing's lack of transparency included blocking data transmissions from sensors linked to a monitoring center operated by the international agency

that verifies compliance with a treaty banning nuclear test explosions. The 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) allows activities designed to ensure the safety of nuclear weapons.

A spokeswoman for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization, which verifies compliance with the pact, told the Wall Street Journal there had been no interruptions in data transmissions from China's five sensor stations since the end of August 2019 following an interruption that began in 2018.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told a daily briefing in Beijing that China was committed to a moratorium on nuclear tests and said the United States was making false accusations.

"China has always adopted a responsible attitude, earnestly fulfilling the international obligations and promises it has assumed," he said. "The US criticism of China is entirely groundless, without foundation, and not worth refuting."

A senior US official said the concerns about China's testing activities buttressed President Donald Trump's case for getting China to join the United States and Russia in talks on an arms control accord to replace the 2010 New START treaty between Washington and Moscow that expires in February.

New START restricted the United States and Russia to deploying no more than 1,550 nuclear warheads, the lowest level in decades, and limited



SHATAKSHI: China may have secretly set off low-level underground nuclear test explosions despite claiming to observe an international pact banning such blasts, the US State Department said in a report on Wednesday that could fuel US-Chinese tensions. —Reuters

the land- and submarine-based missiles and bombers that deliver them. "The pace and manner by which the Chinese government is modernizing its stockpile is worrying, destabilizing, and illustrates why China should be brought into the global arms control framework," said the senior US official on condition of anonymity.

China, estimated to have about 300 nuclear weapons, has repeatedly rejected Trump's proposal, arguing its nuclear force is defensive and

poses no threat. Russia, France and Britain - three of the world's five internationally recognized nuclear powers - signed and ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which still requires ratification by 44 countries to become international law.

China and the United States are among eight signatories that have not ratified it. But China has declared its adherence to its terms, while the United States has observed a unilateral testing moratorium since 1992. — Reuters

China: WHO has said no evidence corona was made in a lab

BEIJING: China's foreign ministry said yesterday the World Health Organization has said there is no evidence that the coronavirus that has infected more than 2 million people globally was made in a lab. Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian made the remark in response to a question about accusations the coronavirus originated in a lab in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, where the epidemic first emerged in late 2019. Zhao told reporters during a daily briefing in Beijing that the World Health Organization's officials "have said multiple times there is no evidence the new coronavirus was created in a laboratory."

US President Donald Trump said on Wednesday his government is trying to determine whether the coronavirus emanated from a lab in Wuhan, China, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Beijing "needs to come clean" on what they know.

Meanwhile, New York has developed its own antibody test that could help detect those immune to coronavirus as the state looks to gradually end its shutdown, Governor Andrew Cuomo said Wednesday. He made the announcement as he ordered all residents of the state — the epicenter of

America's coronavirus outbreak — to cover their faces when in stores or using public transit.

Cuomo said 2,000 people would be tested a day, as he works on a plan for a phased reopening of New York, without speeding up the spread of COVID-19 again, following its weeks-long shutdown.

"We're going to prioritize the antibody testing for first responders and essential workers," Cuomo told reporters. "It's a finger prick test so it's not terribly invasive." Officials are battling with how to get crippled economies up and running again without increasing the rate of infections as the world awaits a vaccine for the deadly virus.

Cuomo said he had a "blueprint" centered on testing residents for the virus, and then tracing and isolating those who have it to control the spread.

Health officials believe antibody tests that have just entered the market and look for whether a person has been previously infected are crucial in answering questions about immunity.

It isn't yet clear whether people who were previously infected will be immune and if so for how long, experts say.



NEW YORK: A healthcare worker is seen looking at her phone during the coronavirus pandemic on Wednesday in New York City. —AFP

Cuomo announced that another 752 New Yorkers had died from COVID-19 in the past 24 hours. He failed to give an updated toll but that number would take statewide deaths past 11,000.

The illness has claimed more than 27,000 lives across the United States, according to a running tally by Johns Hopkins University.

Cuomo said he would sign a decree that would come into effect in three days requiring that everyone in the state cover their mouth and nose when unable to maintain social distancing outside.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have been recommending that US citizens wear masks since April 3. —Agencies

International

Bangladesh coast guard rescues 396 Rohingya from drifting boat

At least 32 dead on a drifting ship on way to Malaysia

DHAKA: At least 32 ethnic Rohingya died on a ship that drifted for weeks after it failed to reach Malaysia, officials of the Bangladesh coast guard said yesterday, following the rescue of 396 starving survivors. For years, Rohingya from Myanmar have boarded boats organized by smugglers in the hope of finding refuge in Southeast Asia, usually making voyages during the dry season from November to March, when the waters are calm.

A human rights group said it believed more boats carrying Muslim-minority Rohingya were adrift at sea, with coronavirus lockdowns in Malaysia and Thailand making it harder for them to find refuge.

"They were at sea for about two months and were starving," a Bangladesh coastguard official told Reuters in a message, adding that the ship was brought to shore late on Wednesday. The 396 survivors would be handed to the U.N. refugee agency, said the official, who had initially said they would be sent to Myanmar. The official also revised the death toll to 32 from 24.

Video images showed a crowd comprised mostly of women and children, some stick-thin and unable to stand, being helped to shore. One emaciated man lay on the sand. One refugee told a reporter the group had been turned back from Malaysia twice and a fight had broken out on-board between passengers and crew at one point. "We understand these men, women and

children were at sea for nearly two months in harrowing conditions and that many of them are extremely malnourished and dehydrated," the UN refugee agency UNHCR said. "UNHCR is offering to assist the government to move these people to quarantine facilities," it added in a statement that also offered medical attention.

Media reports that the group was infected with the virus had not been substantiated, the agency said.

Buddhist-majority Myanmar does not recognize Rohingya as citizens, and they face severe curbs on freedom of movement as well as access to healthcare and education. Myanmar denies persecuting Rohingya and says they are not an indigenous ethnic group but immigrants from South Asia, even though many of them are able to trace their ancestry back centuries. More than a million live in refugee camps in southern Bangladesh, the majority having been driven from homes in Myanmar after a 2017 military crackdown the army said was a response to attacks by Rohingya insurgents.

Rights groups fear virus curbs across southeast Asia could trigger a repeat of a 2015 crisis, when a crackdown by Thailand prompted smugglers to abandon their human cargo at sea on crowded, rickety boats. Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, said she believed several more boats were stranded.

"Rohingya may encounter closed borders



TEKNAF: Belongings of Rohingya refugees lay on the shore as their carrier boat remains anchored nearby in Teknaf yesterday. Thirty-two Rohingya died in a boat crammed with hundreds of "starving" men, women and children after 58 days in the Bay of Bengal after being denied entry by Malaysia and Thailand, officials said.—AFP

supported by a xenophobic public narrative," she said in a message. "COVID-19 cannot be used to deny access to territory to desperate refugees in distress. Another maritime crisis in the Andaman Sea, as in 2015, is unacceptable."

Several boats were trying to reach Malaysian shores and monitoring had been stepped up, a police official in the northwestern state of Kedah told Reuters. A police official in southern Thai-

land said five boats carrying Rohingya had been spotted off the coast of Satun province late on Monday. It was not possible to independently confirm the remarks. People were smuggled out by boat and over land, said Kyaw Hla, a Rohingya from Sittwe in Myanmar's western Rakhine state, where tens of thousands of Rohingya have been confined in camps since a bout of violence in 2012.—Reuters

Japan may broaden emergency, as Abe plans cash payouts

TOKYO: Japan was preparing to extend a state of emergency beyond major cities to the entire nation, media reported yesterday, and a government official said Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will change a draft supplementary budget to include cash payouts for everyone.

The government has declared an emergency in Tokyo and six other areas including Osaka, with more than 9,000 infections nationally and nearly 200 deaths, but other regions have asked to be added amid worries about the persistent spread of the virus. Still some way short of a lockdown, the state of emergency introduced on April 7, and imposed for a month, gave authorities more power to press people to stay at home and businesses to close. It

currently covers about 44 percent of Japan's population.

NHK public broadcaster and other media reported on Thursday that the country was preparing to expand the emergency nationwide amid pressure on Abe to do more amid perceptions his response to the virus in general has been too little, too late. Chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga said a meeting of experts would be convened later on Thursday about expanding the state of emergency.

The coronavirus has bitten deep into the world's third-largest economy. Under the current supplementary budget plan, the government has set aside funds for cash payouts of 300,000 yen (\$2,784) but only for households whose income is judged to have been hit by the coronavirus.—Reuters

Pakistani child bride wrongly jailed for murder

KARACHI: Married as a child and wrongly imprisoned for nearly 20 years over the murder of her husband in Pakistan, Rani Bibi is now free and fighting for compensation in a test case for thousands of other false convictions. Bibi was only 13 when police arrested her for killing her husband whom she remembers "as a good man". Her parents and her brother were also arrested and jailed as they all were the last people to be seen with her husband when the couple was visiting her family's home.

But his body - with a head injury from a blunt weapon - was found buried at his own residence some 25 miles away, according to court documents. She spent the next 19 years toiling in prison for a crime she did not commit, cooking for hundreds of inmates and sweeping endless floors and groundkeeping in the scorching heat.

"I did hard labour," Bibi, 35, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Midranjha village in Punjab province. Bibi was sentenced to life in prison in 2001 - and then followed a series of errors that left her locked up. A

prison superintendent failed to file her appeal to the high court several times and Bibi was left without a state counsel to represent her and was unable to afford a private one.

It was only in 2014 that her appeal was taken up after a lawyer, who headed a local charity, met Bibi on a routine prison visit and fought for her release. In 2017, the Lahore high court released her over a lack of evidence and apologized, saying she was "left to anguish in the jail solely due to (the) lacklustre attitude of the jail authorities". "This court feels helpless in compensating her," the judge said in his order at the time.

But her release signalled the start of a new battle. Pakistan is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - a treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966 that guarantees the right to compensation for victims of wrongful convictions.

But the South Asian country has not yet incorporated the terms into local laws. Bibi and her lawyers are now determined to change that. In March, the Foundation for Fundamental Rights (FFR), a legal advocacy group working for Bibi, filed a petition to demand the Punjab government pay compensation for the "miscarriage of justice". They also asked the government to create new legislation to act against wrongful convictions in Pakistan, where there are likely thousands of cases like Bibi's, according to FFR. In a 2019 report, the group highlighted that in 310 capital punishment cases heard by the Supreme Court between 2010 and 2018, nearly two in five prisoners on death row were wrongfully convicted.—Reuters

International

Friday, April 17, 2020

India charges Muslim leader with culpable homicide for virus surge

India infections jump to 12,380, death toll 414

NEW DELHI: India has brought charges of culpable homicide not amounting to murder against the chief of a Muslim seminary for holding a gathering last month that authorities say led to a big jump in coronavirus infections, police said yesterday.

The headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat group in a cramped corner of Delhi were sealed and thousands of followers, including some from Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, were taken into quarantine after it emerged they had attended meetings there in mid-March. Police initially filed a case against Muhammad Saad Kandhalvi, the chief of the center, for violating a ban on big gatherings but had now invoked the law against culpable homicide, a police spokesman said.

"Delhi police had filed a first information report earlier against the Tablighi chief, now section 304 has been added," the officer said, referring to culpable homicide in the penal code, which carries a maximum punishment of a 10-year prison term.

A spokesman for the Tablighi Jamaat group, Mubeen-ur Rehman, declined to comment saying they had not confirmed reports about the new charges. The Tablighi is one of the world's biggest Sunni Muslim proselytising organizations with followers in more than 80 countries, promoting a pure form of Islam.

Authorities said at the beginning of the month

that a third of the nearly 3,000 coronavirus cases at that time were either people who attended the Tablighi gathering or those who were later exposed to them. India's tally of coronavirus infections has since jumped to 12,380, including 414 deaths, as of yesterday.

In the coronavirus hot spot of Delhi, 1,080 of its 1,561 cases were linked to the group's gathering, according to the city government data on Wednesday. The Tablighi administrators earlier said many of the followers who had visited its offices in a narrow, winding lane in Delhi's historic Nizamuddin quarter were stranded after the government declared a three-week lockdown, and the centre had to offer them shelter.

Critics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government have cautioned against fanning communal tension by laying the blame for the spread of the coronavirus on the Muslim group.

Officials have rejected suggestions they were unfairly targeting the Muslim community, but said they had to rebuke the group because it had behaved irresponsibly by ignoring social-distancing rules. The Tablighi was also linked to a surge of cases in neighbouring Pakistan where it cancelled a similar gathering, but only at the last minute when thousands had already arrived at a premises in the city of Lahore.

Modi govt warned against fanning communal tension



MUMBAI: A man wearing a facemask speaks on his phone at the Dharavi slum during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Mumbai yesterday. —AFP

A gathering organized by the group in Malaysia also led to a surge of cases there and in several other Southeast Asian countries. Pakistan has recorded 6,505 cases according to its latest data, a jump of 520 over the previous day. About 60 per cent of Pakistan's cases load was linked to the Tablighi or were people who had gone on religious pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia and Iran, officials said. Here are official government figures on the spread of the coronavirus in South Asia:

● India has 12,380 confirmed cases, including

414 deaths

- Pakistan has 5,988 cases, including 107 deaths
- Bangladesh has 803 cases, including 39 deaths
- Afghanistan has 784 cases, including 29 deaths
- Sri Lanka has 238 cases, including 7 deaths
- Maldives has 21 cases and no deaths
- Nepal has 16 cases and no deaths
- Bhutan has five cases and no deaths

—Reuters

India allows rural poor to work

NEW DELHI: Millions of people in rural India will be allowed back to work next week despite a nationwide coronavirus lockdown, the government said Wednesday, as it conceded the hardships of shutting its vital farming economy were too great.

Restrictions on movement in the world's second-most populous nation of 1.3 billion people—put in place in late March—have hit the poorest the hardest, including rural migrant workers and other laborers. In cities and towns, usually bustling streets are deserted and shops shuttered, while jobless migrants who did not manage to make the long journey home to villages, often on foot, are living in crowded shelters in cities.

The lockdown has also taken place during the harvest season, with farmers worried their reaping and sowing cycles will be severely disrupted and place further pressure on India's food supply chain—already hit by transport delays. "To mitigate hardship to the public, select additional activities will be allowed," the Home Affairs Ministry said. "The revised consolidated guidelines are aimed at operating those sectors of the economy which are critical from the perspective of rural and agricultural development."

Under the new guidelines to be implemented from April 20, agriculture and related sectors including farmers' markets, lo-

gistics, repair shops and brick kilns will be restarted. Strict measures will be enforced, including the wearing of face masks or coverings. Some factories such as manufacturing will also be re-opened but staffing will be limited and working hours staggered.

Factory owners are required to try and provide dormitories for workers or arrange special transport to and from the plants.

Refineries, coal production and some construction will also be permitted. The rural and industry sectors make up about 40 percent of India's GDP. Some 70 percent of India's workforce lives in rural regions.

No work, no food

Many fear India's lockdown has pushed millions of workers, particularly in the informal economy, deeper into poverty. The northern Uttar Pradesh and Punjab states, home to a combined 250 million people and which have heavily agrarian economies, welcomed the new guidelines and said they would ease the pressure on farmers and other agricultural workers.

Rural migrants to cities have been hard hit, with many losing their jobs amid the lockdown.

Those that were unable to return to their villages with state borders closed and inter-state rail and bus services halted have been housed and fed by state authorities in makeshift camps. But tensions have been boiling over in recent days, with hundreds of migrants in western Gujarat state's Surat city and in Mumbai taking to the streets to demand to be allowed to go home.



SRINAGAR: Workers dispose of waste at a hospital during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Srinagar yesterday. —AFP

Some also complained they were not given enough food to eat. At a wholesale market in the capital New Delhi, vegetable seller Waseem Ahmed, who is 28 and supports a family of 10, said he did not know where or when his next meal would come from. "There are no buyers and I'm selling very little," Ahmed told AFP Wednesday, adding that he couldn't even leave the wholesale market as local police were beating anyone seen outside during the lockdown. —AFP

International

South Korea's ruling party wins parliamentary election victory

Pandemic turns political tide in President Moon Jae-in's favor

SEOUL: South Korea's left-leaning ruling party has won a landslide election victory, partial results showed yesterday, after the coronavirus pandemic turned the political tide in President Moon Jae-in's favor.

His Democratic party secured an absolute majority in the National Assembly, its first for 12 years, on a turnout of 66.2 percent—the highest at a parliamentary election since 1992. Just a few months ago Moon was threatened by scandals over power abuse and sluggish economic growth, while critics called his dovish approach towards North Korea unrealistic.

But the South's relatively quick and effective handling of the epidemic—it has also exported test kits to at least 20 countries—has been a boon for Moon and his party ahead of the polls, largely seen as a referendum on his performance. Koreans' confidence in Moon's administration was boosted by his so-called “coronavirus diplomacy”, such as recent bilateral phone calls with at least 20 state leaders, said Minseon Ku, a politics scholar at Ohio State University in the US.

She added that the president had successfully framed the pandemic as an “opportunity for South Korea to restructure its economy—capitalizing on industries like AI and biopharma”.

This “coupled with South Korea's global recognition” for its handling of the outbreak sat well with voters, Ku said. South Korea was among

the first countries to hold a national election during the pandemic, with citizens still being asked to maintain social distancing after enduring one of the worst early outbreaks of COVID-19.

All voters were required to wear protective masks, clean their hands and don plastic gloves, and undergo temperature checks on arrival at the polling station. Those found to have fevers cast their ballots in separate booths disinfected between each user.

Important momentum

South Korea uses a mix of first-past-the-post seats and proportional representation, and Moon's Democratic party had taken 163 constituencies in the 300-member National Assembly. Its sister party was expected to win another 17 proportional representation seats—due to be declared later Thursday—for a total of 180.

The main conservative opposition United Future Party (UFP) and its satellite party were forecast to secure a total of 103 seats. Moon's position was not at issue as he is directly elected, but the absolute majority means he is likely to be less of a lame duck than previous presidents towards the end of their single five-year term.

“It should give his administration greater momentum,” said Andrew Yeo, a politics professor at the Catholic University of America. Former North Korean diplomat Thae Yong Ho, who defected in

controls on Africans would be lifted, apart from confirmed cases and those who have had close contact with them.

“African friends will be treated fairly, justly and amicably in China,” the ministry said.

Many foreigners in China say they have faced suspicion as the country brought its own outbreak under control, only to see new cases brought from other countries. China has barred entry to most foreigners, and the vast majority of imported cases of the disease have come from Chinese nationals returning home. In Guangzhou, a hub for African traders, authorities said on Tuesday that 111 Africans had tested positive for the coronavirus, while a total of 4,553 Africans had undergone testing since April 4, state media reported.

Several African residents said the black community was being unfairly targeted for stricter checks. “If they do this to all foreigners, then it's not a problem, but it's only black people,” Soumana Toudou, a garment trader from Niger, told Reuters by WhatsApp. He said he was undergoing his second 14-day quarantine because the authorities did not believe he had completed his first. Such decisions are made at the local level and Reuters could not independently confirm this. The scrutiny from the authorities had triggered hostility from Chinese residents, one student said. “The selective testing has set the Guangzhou locals into panic, thinking black people are carrying the virus,” he said. He declined to be identified. — Reuters

Several African ambassadors wrote to China's foreign minister last week, calling for the “cessation of forceful testing, quarantine and other inhuman treatments meted out to Africans”. Ghana's foreign minister on Saturday called in China's ambassador to convey the government's concern. China's foreign ministry said on Monday all foreigners are treated equally. But it also said virus



SEOUL: A South Korean official removes a poster of multiple candidates running in the parliamentary elections after the polls in Seoul yesterday. South Korea's left-leaning ruling party has won a landslide election victory, partial results showed yesterday. — AFP

2016 and stood for the conservative UFP, won in the wealthy Gangnam district in Seoul—becoming the first former Northern official ever to be directly elected to the South's parliament.

Thae shed a tear as he sang South Korea's national anthem after his win was confirmed early yesterday. But UFP heavyweights former prime minister Hwang Kyo-ahn and ex-parliamentary

floor leader Na Kyung-won both failed to be re-elected. The conservative party had “failed to re-brand” itself after the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye, which “limited the boundary of support to older generations and core support regions”, Ji Yeon Hong, a professor at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, told AFP. — AFP

Diplomatic furor over treatment of Africans in China

GUANGZHOU, China: Huddled under a high-way bridge with a small bag of belongings, a 19-year old student from Ivory Coast was desperately dialling his few contacts in China. The student said he arrived in the southern city of Guangzhou last week, after completing his quarantine in another city, during a coronavirus clampdown that several African countries and Africans in Guangzhou say has unfairly targeted them.

“I really need help. I just don't want to sleep on the streets again,” he said on Monday, asking not to be identified by name. He came to China to study the language but his university shut because of the coronavirus. Hotels kept turning him away, but later on Monday he said he had found one.

Several African ambassadors wrote to China's foreign minister last week, calling for the “cessation of forceful testing, quarantine and other inhuman treatments meted out to Africans”. Ghana's foreign minister on Saturday called in China's ambassador to convey the government's concern. China's foreign ministry said on Monday all foreigners are treated equally. But it also said virus

Kim Jong Un's tribute absence sparks speculation

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's conspicuous absence from commemorations for his grandfather Kim Il Sung's birth anniversary this week suggests he could be looking to emphasize his own authority over his family's legacy, analysts said.

The April 15 birthday of the North's founder is the most important celebration of the nuclear-armed country's annual political calendar, known as the Day of the Sun. North Koreans are taught from birth to revere Kim Il Sung and his son and successor Kim Jong Il, father of the current leader, and all adults wear badges depicting one or both men.

But Kim's absence from any official reports on this year's commemorations led analysts to speculate he wants to distance himself from the “cult of personality” surrounding the country's ruling dynasty.

The state KCNA news agency did not mention him in a Thursday report on senior officials visiting the Kumsusan Palace to pay the “highest tribute” to the two late leaders. Since inheriting power in 2011, Kim has always gone to the

sprawling mausoleum on the outskirts of the capital on their birth anniversaries.

Pictures Thursday in the Rodong Sinmun newspaper, the official mouthpiece of the ruling party, did not show him attending, although a floral basket was draped with a banner bearing his name.

“Kim Jong Un wants to break away from the past, as well as the North's traditional cult of personality,” said Ahn Chan-il, a North Korean defector and researcher in Seoul. “His message is that Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung's times are now over,” he said. “He wants to come across and brand himself as a leader who is modern and competent, rather than a descendant of his predecessors.”

“And he wants to gradually tone down the idolization of the two late leaders as it goes against his agenda to brand the North as a ‘normal state’.”

‘Propaganda effort’

The ruling party's claim to legitimacy has its roots in Kim Il Sung's fight against Korea's Japanese colonizers and for years the North's official propaganda has promoted Kim Jong Un's resemblance to his grandfather, in appearance, manner, and even handwriting. But in another departure from normal practice, there appeared to be no outside basket from Kim before the two men's giant statues in Pyongyang on Wednesday, when citizens attended to bow before them. — AFP

Lifestyle

Friday Times

FRIDAY, APRIL 17, 2020

www.kuwaittimes.net

A sign reading 'KEEP THIS FAR APART' is seen in front of a horse sculpture during the coronavirus pandemic on April 14, 2020 in New York City. — AFP

Afghan girls try building ventilator from used car parts

See Page 24

Toys, shoes, passport photos: Remembering Afghanistan's dead

Nargis's husband wrote beautiful letters, even from a Taliban prison. But after the insurgents tortured and killed him, those pieces of paper became painful reminders of loss until a Kabul museum asked her to share them. The modest space in the basement of an Afghan non-profit has exhibited dozens of "memory boxes" filled with mementos ranging from photographs and journals to perfume and plastic toys — all belonging to victims of conflict. Now 48, Nargis was a peniless mother of five — her youngest was just seven months old — when her husband was murdered two decades ago. Eleven years later, one of her sons, an Afghan soldier, went missing and has never resurfaced.

The relentless onslaught of violence means that for many Afghans, remembrance is a luxury, and a solitary one at that. Until now. The Afghanistan Center for Memory and Dialogue is the first museum devoted to victims of conflict in the war-torn country. "We need places like this so victims can be remembered," Nargis said. "I want other people to know who my husband was," she added, describing him as a devoted father who filled up notebooks with poems and birthday messages for their children.

'The only things left'

The museum, which is temporarily closed during the coronavirus crisis, aims to do just that, featuring narratives in English and Dari, accompanied by images of the victims — blurry photographs, sharp studio portraits and, in the case of some who perhaps never saw a camera in their lives, faded identity papers. But it's the memory boxes that tell their story — and that of Afghanistan — with piercing poignancy. A pink toy dressing table, a doll wearing red plastic shoes and a sweater covered in tiny black hearts: the life of a little girl killed in a Kabul bombing is distilled into a

heartbreaking vignette pieced together by her grandfather.

Many of the exhibits feature the very old mourning the very young, underlining the catastrophic losses faced by a country that has been at war for generations. There are notebooks with childish scribbling belonging to a boy who died when the Taliban dropped a bomb on his school, a medal earned by a computer science graduate who was a role model to her younger sister, and shoes worn by a 25-year-old man gunned down by the insurgents. One man mourns 15 family members killed over a 30-year period, including a teenage girl who died when a stray bullet entered her home

during a clash between rival groups. With every death, the material memory of those killed grows increasingly precious.

For every survivor like Nargis, who was eager to share the burden of remembrance, there were others who were more reluctant. Nik Mohammad Sharif, whose brother Dawood was jailed and executed by Soviet-backed Communists in 1979, told AFP he struggled to convince members of his family to participate in the project. "These are the only things left of my brother," Sharif, 57, said, referring to Dawood's photographs and the letters he smuggled out in empty toothpaste tubes. Giving them to the museum was a

wrenching decision for the family, particularly since Dawood's body was never found, with Sharif surmising that he was likely laid to rest in one of the many mass graves dotting the country.

'The pain of others'

As foreign forces prepare to leave Afghanistan under a deal between the US and the Taliban, victims have largely been banished to the sidelines despite the International Criminal Court recently calling for an investigation into possible war crimes. "The purpose of opening this museum is not just to put objects on display," said museum associate Fatima Alavi. "When people come here, we want to start a conversation with them." For Jawad Sakhizada, the visit to the museum evoked searing pain, followed by a surprising sense of relief.

The 29-year-old had buried his younger brother only months earlier, when he was killed in an Islamic State attack on a Kabul wedding. "We grieved for a long time," Sakhizada told AFP. "But when I came here, I realized there are others in this country who have suffered even more than me", he said, standing before a towering installation made from bloodied clothing, dust-covered shoes and broken watches recovered from blast sites. "When we see the pain of others, we forget our own pain," he added. He is now looking to donate his brother's wrestling uniform and religious books to the museum. It could be a while before they are displayed however: more than 600 people are waiting to see their loved ones memorialized. In the last year, some of the exhibits have travelled overseas, while in Kabul the museum regularly hosts groups and organizes discussions. But its ambitions are bigger, Alavi told AFP. "We want the Taliban to come and see this," she said. —AFP



This photo shows a "memory box" of an Afghan child victim of conflict with her doll (center) she played with before she was killed, at the Afghanistan Center for Memory and Dialogue in Kabul.



Nik Mohammad Sharif, 57, standing next to a "memory box" of his brother Dawood who was a victim of conflict.



A "memory box" with a pile of belongings of victims collected from sites of several suicide attacks in Afghanistan.



Museum associate Fatima Alavi (left) talking with a relative of a victim of conflict in Afghanistan, at the Afghanistan Center for Memory and Dialogue in Kabul. —AFP photos

Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, April 17, 2020

Robots ride to rescue as delivery risks rise

What looks like a rolling picnic cooler stops at the crosswalk, waits for a car to pass and then navigates its way at a leisurely pace down the sidewalk in suburban Washington. Three blocks away, Jake Williams and his three-year-old daughter Emilia wait for the delivery robot and take out bags with pizza, fresh fruit and a loaf of French bread from the nearby Broad Branch Market. “We can’t go into the shops now,” says Williams, among those locked down due to the virus pandemic. “And it’s fun for her.” The Starship delivery robots have seen surging demand in dozens of cities around the world, with consumers staying home and virus risks growing for both shoppers and delivery workers.

Starship began working with the Broad Branch in early April, when the corner store was forced to close to shoppers because it was too small to ensure proper social distancing. Store owner Tracy Stannard said a fleet of up to 10 robots each day, managed by Starship, helps the market meet demands in the neighborhood. The store handles 60 to 70 deliveries daily, half by robot. “Some people request the robot, they don’t even care about the groceries,” Stannard said. “It’s cute to see them roaming the neighborhood and it makes people happy.” Robot deliveries from Starship and a handful of other companies meet only a tiny fraction of food deliveries, but highlight a need in a time of social distancing and pandemic fears. The jump in demand comes as consumers see a trip to the grocery store as a perilous adventure, and retail employees are scrambling to keep safe. More than 40 grocery store employees in the US have died from the virus, according to a Washington Post tally. And delivery workers around the US have staged protests to press safety demands.

Expanding demand

San Francisco-based Starship Technologies, created by two Skype founders, is gearing up to operate in other areas around Washington and recently launched with retailers in Tempe, Arizona, and in cities in Britain and California. The rolling devices operate autonomously at a speed of around six kilometers (four miles) per hour and can carry about three bags of goods. “The demand for contactless delivery has expanded exponentially in recent weeks,” said Ryan Tuohy, vice president of Starship. “Our robots are doing autonomous deliveries in five countries and we’re grateful that our robots can make life a little bit easier for everyone.” A handful of other companies also has been stepping up.

Silicon Valley startup Nuro recently began delivering groceries in the Houston area in partnership with grocery giant Kroger with its R2 autonomous robot, which travels on streets at speeds up to 40 kilometers (25 miles) per hour and can transport some 190 kilos (400 pounds). Nuro is moving to expand its service and has received approval in California to operate on public roads. “We did not foresee our service helping to keep Americans safe from contagion. But the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the public need for contactless delivery services,” Nuro’s David Estrada said in a blog post. “Times like these reinforce the need for autonomous delivery services like Nuro, and how they can benefit communities.” Delivery robots from Postmates, a delivery startup, have also been seen on the streets in California. And similar autonomous robots are being tested by Amazon.

Above the fray?

Drone delivery is another area where interest is growing due to the pandemic. Wing, the drone startup created by Google parent Alphabet, has seen a jump in demand in its pilot projects in rural southwestern Virginia — where it delivers non-prescription medicines and other items from the Walgreens chain — and in Australia and Finland, a company spokesman said. “While we recognize that this service will be a small relief during this time, we hope it means one less trip to the store for items our customers may need, and provides an efficient way for local businesses to reach their cus-



Kimmo Kartano unloads a food delivery robot from the Broad Branch Market grocery store as Audra Grant looks on in front of their house in the Chevy Chase neighborhood.



Resident Carole Feldman takes out her order from a Starship Technologies delivery robot as neighbors look in the Chevy Chase neighborhood of Washington, DC. —AFP photos



Resident Josh Calder watches a Starship Technologies delivery robot leave after receiving his order of Easter candies.

tomers in a time when limiting human-to-human contact is important.” Wing CEO James Ryan Burgess said.

Amazon and others have continued testing drone deliveries, but these systems are subject to regulatory barriers which have prevented deployment. Zipline, a California startup which has been

delivering medical supplies by drone in Africa, has indicated it wants offer similar services in the US once it gets regulatory approval. “Zipline is helping other countries mount their national response efforts to #COVID19,” the company said in a tweet. “As an American company in a time of crisis, we want to help our country as well.” —AFP



Food delivery robots are seen in front of the Broad Branch Market grocery store in the Chevy Chase neighborhood.



Valerie Cloke, sits in an armchair in her living room watching television as Britain's Queen Elizabeth II delivers a special address in the village of Hartley Wintney, west of London.—AFP photos



Priest-in-Charge of St John's Church, Angie Smith, sits with her husband Vince, while her daughter Thea, a Curate, washes her brother Harry's feet during a Seder meal as they remember the passover and Jesus' last supper at The Vicarage in Hartley Wintney.



Car enthusiast Karel Brabec works on a gearbox in his garage at home.

In English village, life goes on behind closed doors

It is an ordinary day in the English village of Hartley Wintney — Lyn Briggs grooms a poodle, Karel Brabec tinkers in his garage and Norrie Short plays table tennis. But due to the COVID-19 lockdown it all takes place behind closed doors in this idyllic setting just 40 miles (70 km) southwest of London. Like most of the 66 million Britons, the 5,000 residents of the Hampshire village have been staying at home since March 23 when the government ordered a lockdown to stop contagion.

The result is that life no longer revolves around the main street with its organic shops and coffee chains or the cricket ground, which is one of the oldest in the country.

Instead, pretty much all life takes place indoors. At 22, James Lewington should be at college. But instead it is at his parents' place that he reviews his geography course work, cup of tea in his hand, phone placed next to his laptop, while on the other side of the window his father is riding a bicycle.



Jason Sutton, 53, an oil company geophysicist, works on a computer in his converted playroom office.



Pam Large, 89, paints a water color in her kitchen to occupy her time during the lockdown.

Lifestyle | Feature

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James Lewington, 22, drinks a cup of tea while studying his BSc Geography coursework while his father Guy is reflected in the window at their home.



Vicky Sweeney and her daughter Alice exercise in their living room during a live online PE lesson on 'Fancy Dress Friday' at their home.



The Ewbank family sit together in their lounge while watching an online Easter Sunday service at home.

Ruth Jarman rehearses violin pieces with her three children. And, because there is no school, Alice Sweeney is busy in her living room with her mother Vicky in front of an online gym class. Briggs, owner of two large poodles, Lulu and Laika, says: "Now that the rest of the family stays at home all the time, dogs have some competition to get my attention."

For some, the restrictions are an opportunity to devote more time to certain passions, such as Pam Large, 89, who for lack of being able to continue playing golf, practices watercolour paintings in her kitchen. For others, it's time to discover new experiences, like the Ewbank family who spent Easter Sunday on the living room sofa and took part in a "virtual communion". Penny Ewbank, who works for the fire brigade, described this unfamiliar new life as "a little surreal". "Life in lockdown has been a really interesting time. As a key worker, I am still going out to work, but time at home as a family has been incredibly special and not something we may ever get again, so we're making the most of it," she says. But neighbor Valerie Bucksey, like so many, is separated from her family and is suffering from the sense of isolation. For her, the worst thing is "not seeing our grandchildren and family except online, missing physically being with our grandson to celebrate his third birthday".—AFP



Ruth Jarman and her children, Helen, Sophie and Tom practice a string quartet arrangement of 'Somewhere over the Rainbow' in their music room.



Valerie Bucksey plants and waters seeds while sitting in her conservatory while her husband John looks on at their home.



Lyn Briggs grooms her 16-year-old standard poodle, Lulu, while 9-year-old Laika sits beside them.

DiCaprio and De Niro seek 'co-star' in virus charity drive

Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro have rallied fellow Hollywood A-listers in a new coronavirus fundraising campaign by offering a walk-on role in their upcoming film to one lucky donor. The actors are set to star in "Killers of the Flower Moon," one of next year's most hotly anticipated movies, which is directed by Martin Scorsese and tells the true story of Native American killings in 1920s Oklahoma. "If you ever wondered what it was like to be able to work with the great Martin Scorsese, this is your chance," said DiCaprio in an Instagram video Wednesday.

The randomly selected winner will also have lunch with the stars and director, and attend the premiere. The initiative is part of the #AllInChallenge launched Tuesday, which sees celebrities including movie and sport stars auction or donate a "once-in-a-lifetime fan experience," and challenge others to do the same. Opportunities to have Justin Bieber fly to your house for a private show, watch a Los Angeles Lakers basketball game ringside with Magic Johnson, or play golf with Rob Lowe have collectively raised \$4 million so far. Organizers hope to raise \$100 million. All

proceeds go to charities providing food relief to those in need during the lockdown, including Meals on Wheels, No Kid Hungry and America's Food Fund — launched this month by DiCaprio and Laurene Jobs, the widow of Steve Jobs.

In his video DiCaprio challenged Ellen DeGeneres, who within hours responded by offering a chance to co-host her chat show, and Matthew McConaughey, who invited a donor to join him in his private box to watch an American Football game in Texas. The campaign is the latest in a series of high-profile celebrity initiatives over the deadly coronavirus pandemic, from singer Rihanna's multi-million-dollar donations to Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey's new \$1 billion relief fund. Some have picked subjects closer to their heart — "Seinfeld" co-creator Larry David started a \$150,000 GoFundMe campaign to support out-of-work golf caddies at his highly exclusive Riviera Country Club in Los Angeles. —AFP



Photo shows DiCaprio (right) and De Niro (left).

Afghan girls try building ventilator from used car parts

A team of robot-designing girls in Afghanistan is trying to build a low-cost medical ventilator from car parts, as health authorities look to boost critical-care capabilities for coronavirus patients in the impoverished country. If the teenagers succeed and can get government approval for their prototype, they say it could be replicated for as little as \$300, where normally ventilators sell for around \$30,000. "The team is working with local health specialists, as well as experts from Harvard University, to produce the prototype based on a design by Massachusetts Institute of Technology," said Roya Mahboob, who runs an Afghan tech company and sponsors the team of five girls, aged 14-17.

They are part of a bigger group of high-achieving high school girls known as the "Afghan Dreamers", from the western city of Herat, where coronavirus is on the rise after thousands of people returned from neighboring Iran as it experienced a spike in cases. The girls made headlines in 2017 after being denied visas to take part in a robotics competition in Washington — before President Donald Trump intervened and they were allowed to travel. They are taking engine and battery parts from a Toyota Corolla — ubiquitous on the streets of Afghanistan — to produce a prototype they started designing after the Herat governor called for more ventilators as coronavirus cases rose.

Central to the ventilator is a self-inflating plastic sac known as an Ambu bag that medical staff use to help patients breathe. The girls' prototype uses a mechanical system to operate the bag automatically and accurately. "The complicated part is how to adjust the timing and pressure of pumping, as different patients require different volume and pressure of air based on their age and the severity of their condition," Somaya Farooqi, the team's 17-year-old captain, told AFP. With a population of 35 million, Afghanistan only has about 300 ventilators. Wahidullah Mayar, a spokesman for Afghanistan's health ministry, said officials have asked specialists and engineers to help the team. "We appreciate and encourage these hardworking girls, our sisters, for their efforts to produce ventilators," Mayar said.

Any ventilator prototype would have to be approved by the World Health Organization and the Afghan health ministry before the team could start producing more devices, Mayar said. As of Wednesday, Afghan officials had reported at least 784 coronavirus cases and 24 deaths across the country. The true number of cases is feared to be much higher, as only limited testing kits are available. —AFP



In this photograph workers of an all-female robotic team build a ventilator in preparation for COVID-19 coronavirus patients, at a workshop in Herat. —AFP photos

Lone bell chime marks Notre-Dame fire anniversary

A lone bell rang out from what remains of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on Wednesday, in the sole commemoration to mark a year since a massive blaze nearly destroyed one of the world's most revered monuments. Reconstruction of the mediaeval cathedral has been halted, with France under lockdown over the deadly coronavirus outbreak. The bell dubbed "Emmanuel" in the cathedral's south tower rang out at 8:00 pm, the hour French people have become accustomed to gather at their windows and on balconies to applaud health workers on the frontlines of the battle against the virus that has killed over 17,000 people in France.

President Emmanuel Macron vowed Wednesday to do everything possible to ensure the 13th-century masterpiece is restored to its former glory within five years — a time-frame already judged optimistic by many, and now further imperilled. "We will reconstruct the Notre-Dame in five years, I promised. We will do everything to meet this deadline. Yes, construction is at a halt for the moment due to the health crisis, but it will resume as soon as possible," he said in a video message. The ferocious blaze, watched in horror by millions of television viewers worldwide, has not been forgotten even if "our days, our thoughts, our lives are usurped" by the coronavirus outbreak, Macron said. "If the restoration of Notre-Dame is important to us all, it is clearly also because it is a symbol of the resilience of our people, of their ability to overcome trials, and to recover."

Toxic lead, mangled scaffolding

The 13-tonne bell is the cathedral's oldest, installed in 1686 at the behest of King Louis XIV, according to the Notre-Dame website. Its chime has punctuated most major events in France since then, and in a solemn gesture was the only commemoration scheduled for Wednesday. Firefighters battled through the night on April 15, 2019 to save the cathedral from the blaze which ravaged its roof and dramatically toppled the steeple. Macron had promised a herculean effort to have the UNESCO heritage site restored in time for the Paris Olympics of 2024. —AFP

20 OF THE WORLD'S MOST EXTRAORDINARY TOILETS

As any experienced traveler knows, you can tell a whole lot about a place by its bathrooms. Whatever you prefer to call them – lavatory, loo, bog, khasi, thunderbox, dunny, washroom or water closet – toilets are a (sometimes opaque, often wide-open) window into the secret soul of a destination. It's not just how well they're looked after that's revealing, but where they are positioned and the way they've been conceptualized, designed and decorated. Toilets so often transcend their primary function of being a convenience to become a work of art in their own right, or to make a cultural statement about the priorities, traditions and values of the venues, locations and communities they serve. These are some of our favorite toilets around the world. This article is an excerpt from Lonely Planet's Toilets: A Spotter's Guide.



These peering public toilets are found in Wellington, the capital of New Zealand.— Shutterstock

1. Lobster loos, Wellington, New Zealand

Spend a penny? Wellington, the capital of New Zealand, spent NZ\$375,000 on architect Bret Thurston's boggly-eyed design for the public lavatories on the city's windswept waterfront. It is hoped that the two tentacles, armored in orange steel, will attract tourists to Wellington, though it's a long way to go.



The cliffside Barafu Camp toilet hangs over 4600m of vertical air.— Jorn Eriksson

2. Barafu Camp, Tanzania

Squatting on the edge of a cliff, 4600m up the flanks of Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the Barafu Camp khazi takes the concept of a long-drop toilet to an elevated level. Pole pole (slowly, slowly) is the standard mantra when climbing Africa's highest peak, but that adage doesn't apply here.



The mysterious shower and toilet in the middle of nowhere in Iceland.— Marco Stupan

3. Krafla, Iceland

This ever-so-alfresco ablation station in the middle of the Icelandic outback, near Krafla Geothermal Power Station, is an enigma. No one seems to know who installed it, or why, but that doesn't worry happy hikers who, after stumbling across it, invariably Instagram images of themselves perched on the pan.



The stunningly designed toilet at the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar.— Harry Hexie

4. Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar

Although this structure (designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Ieoh Ming Pei) looks capable of blasting off into space and attaining warp speed within seconds, it actually has a slightly more prosaic purpose in life – as a public convenience in the park outside the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha.



Foshan's fountain of toilets is made of 10,000 toilets, sinks and urinals.— Al Sol

5. Fountain of toilets, Foshan, China

Made from 10,000 toilets, sinks and urinals, this fantastic flushing fountain graces Shiwan Park in Foshan, China, the world's ceramic capital. The installation, which is 100m (330ft) long and 5m (16ft) high, is the handy work of Chinese artist Shu Yong, who used factory seconds and pre-loved pans to create his masterpiece.



Eastern Serengeti

6. Long-drop, Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania

Tanzania's Oldupai Gorge is part of the Rift Valley, where the human species spent its formative years. Our ancient forebears went about their business here in the eastern Serengeti over 1.9 million years ago. Continuing in that tradition, this toilet features a seat directly overhanging the edge of the ravine.



7. Public lavatories, Matakana, New Zealand

Locals in Matakana waited seven years and spent a pretty penny (NZ\$400,000) to come face-to-face with their pouting public toilets, which provoked plaudits and protestation. Matakana lad Steffan de Haan’s design is highly symbolic, from the facade to the ship-shape cubicles, a nod to the local boat-building industry.

Matakana’s public toilets drew fans and critics, but the result is certainly unique.— Holger Vath



The toilet at Mt Shuksan might not have much privacy, but the view is spectacular.— Joel Castaneda

8. Mt Shuksan, Washington, USA

Facilities at Mt Shuksan’s Sulphide Glacier base camp offer a grand vista of Mt Baker on a clear day, but they can be a bit breezy when the weather comes in. The peaks rise in North Cascades National Park in Whatcom County, Washington, just 19km (11.8 miles) shy of the Canadian border.



The little “Toilet island” in the middle of Caribbean sea .—Tomas Mähring

9. Toilet island, near Placencia, Belize

Eat your heart out Robinson Crusoe. This paradisiacal punctuation mark in the Caribbean Sea off Placencia, Belize, boasts its own flushing throne, from where the king or queen of the castaways can survey their desert-island domain. It’s a long way to the shops when you run out of paper, though...



The toilet near Sproat Lake in British Columbia, Canada.—Susan Brea

10. Eco-toilet, British Columbia, Canada

Yes, of course bears do... especially when the facilities are this swanky. Make like a grizzly and sit in the woods, on this uber green composting machine in Taylor Arm Provincial Park, a raw wilderness area on the north side of Sproat Lake in British Columbia, Canada.



Toilets found in Chott el Djerid, Tunisia.—Lucio Valmaggia

11. “Comfort toilets”, Chott el Djerid, Tunisia

Chott el Djerid, a large salt lake in southern Tunisia, was used as the setting for Luke Skywalker’s boyhood home in the original Star Wars film. The Lars’ subterranean homestead may have been destroyed, but the Galactic Empire failed to extinguish the new hope represented by these roadside ‘comfort’ toilets.



A stellar view is the trade-off for limited privacy at these toilets in the Grand Canyon.— James Capo

12. Tonto Trail, Grand Canyon National Park, USA

Limited privacy is the trade-off for sensational views from the hot seats of these composting campsite toilets on the 112km (70 mile)-long Tonto Trail through Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona. Instead of going rim-to-rim, the Tonto Trail traces the Colorado River, traversing the bench separating the inner gorge from the upper canyon.

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A sign for the toilet in the Siloli Desert, Bolivia.— Robert Downie

13. Desert toilet, the Siloli, Bolivia

You can forget frills, privacy and shelter in this open-air latrine in the arid heart of Bolivia's Siloli Desert, but there's never a queue for the toilet. The Siloli, a continuation of the Atacama Desert in neighbouring Chile, is famed for wind-sculpted rock formations such as Arbol de Piedra (Stone Tree).



The taps from the waterfall washroom at Taroko National Park use water from a nearby waterfall.— Jan Philipp Kohn

14. Waterfall washroom, Taroko National Park, Taiwan

The Baiyang Waterfall Trail in Taiwan's Taroko National Park might not be very long, but it boasts seven impressive tunnels and numerous curtain-style cascades along its 2km (1.2-mile) length. Appropriately, the washroom by the trailhead is fed directly by one of the path's waterfalls.



The leafy toilets inside the Schonbrunn Castle in Vienna.— Pierre F

15. Schönbrunn Castle toilets, Vienna, Austria

These leafy conveniences are found in the vast verdant grounds of Vienna's 17th-century Schönbrunn Castle. This 1441-room Baroque palace, complete with expansive gardens exquisitely manicured and shaped over successive centuries by the green hands of the Habsburg's royal gardeners, is one of the biggest attractions in the Austrian capital.



This roadside rest stop in Laos features a postcard-worthy view.— Yehonathan Elozory

16. Valley view restroom, Laos

Sit, stand or squat – the choice is yours in this well-maintained roadside rest stop in the mountainous South-east Asian nation of Laos. Whichever way you lean, the valley view from the loo, through a wide-open hole in the wall, is utterly uplifting.



The wooden outhouse next to Huldefossen waterfall in Norway.— Roelof Nijholt

17. Huldefossen waterfall, Norway

No need to run the tap while perching on this picturesque potty next to the cacophonous Huldefossen Waterfall near Førde in Norway; the sound of thousands of gallons of water rushing over the 90m (295ft) drop should drown out any unwanted acoustics. Norway boasts nine of the world's 20 highest waterfalls.



Art outside the Mr. Toilet House in Suwon, South Korea.—Shutterstock

18. Mr Toilet House, Suwon, South Korea

Suwon, in South Korea, boasts a theme park totally devoted to toilets. The eccentric attraction revolves around a commode-shaped museum, former home of Sim Jae-duck – aka 'Mr Toilet' – one-time mayor of Suwon and first president of the World Toilet Association, which strives to improve sanitation in developing countries.



The outhouse at Segantini Hut.—Getty Images

19. Segantini hut restroom, Switzerland

Austrian-born 19th-century painter Giovanni Segantini lived his last years in a St Moritz alpine aerie now known as Segantini Hut, capturing the Swiss peaks with his palette. The hut, perched at 2731m (8960ft), is currently a lodge, where visitors to the iconic outhouse enjoy eye-watering valley views of the Engadine.



The Chena Hot Springs Resort's outhouse in Alaska.— Getty Images

20. Log outhouse, Chena Hot Springs Resort, Alaska, USA

If Santa has an outhouse, it surely resembles this log bog on the banks of a creek meandering through Chena Hot Springs Resort in Fairbanks, Alaska – though you'll have to be an employee to enjoy it. The resort also boasts an Ice Museum, featuring frozen carvings, including a life-size effigy of jousting knights and a depiction of a (non-functioning) ice toilet.

— www.lonelyplanet.com

Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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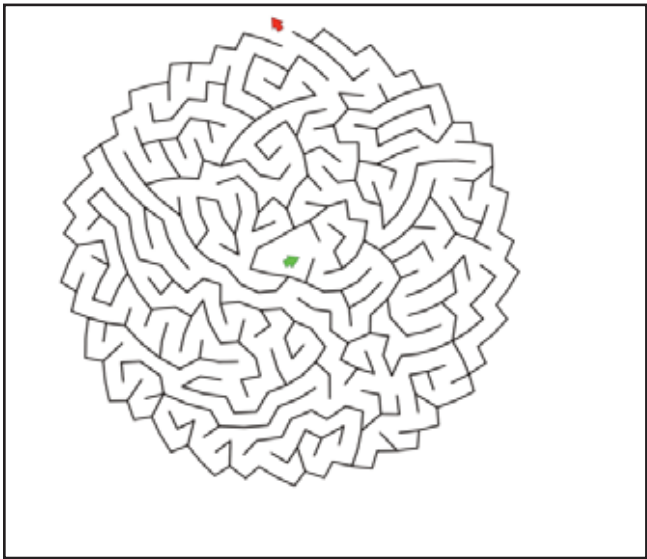
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Yesterday's Solution

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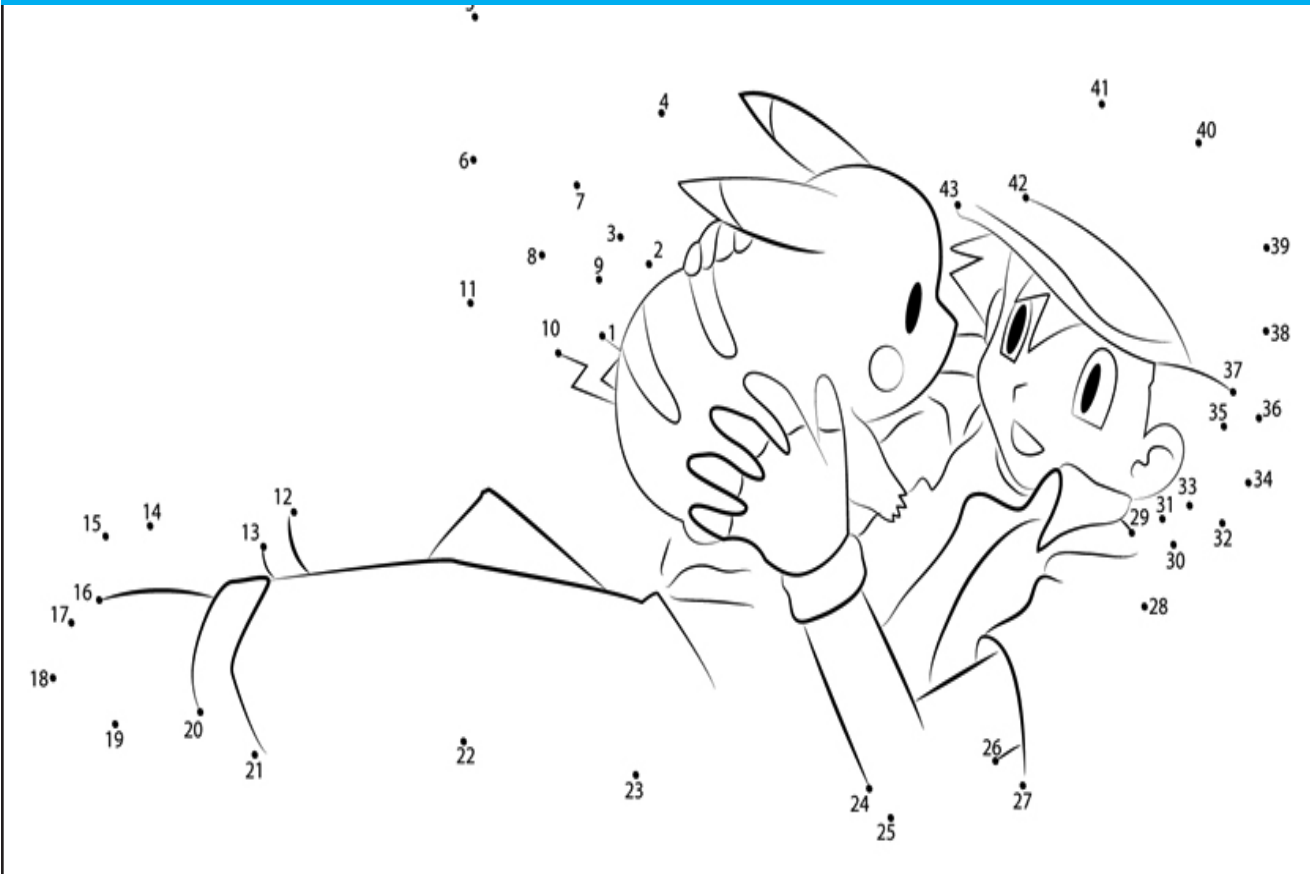
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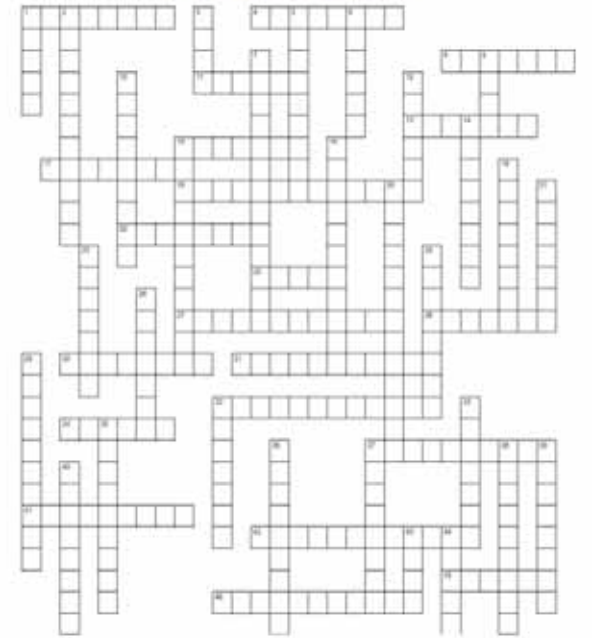
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Stars

STAR TRACK




Aries (March 21-April 19)

This is a good day for you to analyze information, Aries. You have an especially acute business sense, which you should use to your advantage. Whether you're thinking of translating a creative project into a business proposal or working on that business plan, all indications say that your efforts will yield rich rewards. Make the most of whatever this day has to offer.




Taurus (April 20-May 20)

You're a conscientious, hard worker, Taurus, but today your thoughts are more on home than work. You feel especially close to your family and friends. They mean the most to you. Jobs and even careers come and go, but friends and family are forever. Enjoy being with them today. Gather everyone together and order too much Chinese take-out. It's just fine if you restart your diet tomorrow.




Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Today is likely to be another busy one for you, Gemini. You might have a volunteer activity in the morning and then get roped into running errands in the afternoon. It will be busy bordering on hectic, but the hustle and bustle of being out and about is energizing for you. Invite some friends to join you for dinner in the evening to cap off this high-energy day.




Cancer (June 21-July 22)

You have a strong spirit of cooperation today, Cancer. It inspires you to pitch in and help others without being asked. Your romantic partner could be surprised to see you show up and help with a chore. Never mind that you don't know what you're doing - you'll figure it out. Others will be impressed to see you going above and beyond what you've been asked to do. Your efforts on all fronts won't go unnoticed.




Leo (July 23-August 22)

Keep your eyes and ears open to all new possibilities, Leo. Even if it isn't your habit to read the "Help Wanted" section of the newspaper, do so today. You might be surprised at what you find there. Your skills apply to all sorts of jobs. You don't need to limit your search to one profession. You have a good mind that's working in overdrive now. Use it to figure out the next steps for your advancement.




Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Today your strong sense of nostalgia likely has you leaning toward all things old. If you do some furniture shopping, you'll be drawn to antique shops rather than contemporary stores. There is something about the patina that only comes with age. This applies to people as well as objects, which may explain why you tend to prefer to be with people who are older than you.




Libra (September 23-October 22)

This is bound to be a wonderful day, Libra, as everybody seems to be in a warm and congenial mood. You and your romantic partner, in particular, are feeling especially close and connected today. If marriage is the process of falling in and out of love, then you're both definitely in the "in" phase. Enjoy it while it lasts! Spend a quiet day together and cap it off with dinner at an elegant bistro.




Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

You have much to be grateful for, Scorpio. Why not go out tonight and celebrate with friends? Forget about work and family troubles and kick up your heels. Have a high old time. You deserve the break. If you don't seize these moments when you have the opportunity, you risk becoming a single-minded individual who thinks only of work at the expense of life's other great pleasures.




Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

You're eager and optimistic today, Sagittarius, which works well with your strong, capable nature. You're likely to find that things begin to click into place at work. Something that has been troubling you for some time suddenly becomes clear. What was once a stumbling block is now a mere bump in the road and easily overcome. All indications are that you'll be successful at whatever you do now, so dare to dream big.




Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Today should be devoted to paperwork and getting your financial affairs and budgets in order, Capricorn. Once this is done, you can relax in the evening with friends and loved ones. You're especially intuitive right now, so you'll be able to pick up on all the unspoken thoughts and feelings of those around you.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

All financial undertakings have good aspects today, Aquarius. It could be that you have been thinking of starting a new business venture. If so, you're likely to meet the ideal business partner. Keep your eyes and ears tuned as you go about your daily routine. You never know when you might be introduced to that one special person you need in your life. Socialize in the evening with good friends.



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

This is bound to be a wonderful day, Pisces. You're looking and feeling great and it shows! This is a day of kindness and cooperation. You could find that your family pitches in to help at home without being asked. Your romantic partner might volunteer to clean out the garage and your children start to clean their rooms. This definitely isn't your typical day! Enjoy the harmony that reigns today.

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

Business

FRIDAY, APRIL 17, 2020

34 Reeling states leave jobless Americans waiting for help**35** US banking giants report gloomy earnings despite strong trading**35** A comprehensive maintenance program for flydubai fleet

HYDERABAD: Laborers sort raw mangoes after an auction at the Gaddiannaram fruit market during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, on the outskirts of Hyderabad yesterday. — AFP

G20 agrees to debt relief for poorest countries

Pandemic to bring Asia's 2020 growth to a halt: IMF

RIYADH: With the global economy plunged into the worst recession in a century, the Group of 20 nations on Wednesday announced a one-year debt standstill for the world's poorest nations as they struggle to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. The G20, which brings together the world's largest economies, also reiterated the pledge to deploy "all available policy tools" to deal with the health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19.

With over two million cases and fatalities approaching 130,000 worldwide, many of the less developed countries are facing the heaviest burden since they do not have the spending power to deal with treatment and the economic fallout caused by widespread lockdowns of their economies imposed to contain the virus.

Meanwhile, Asia's economic growth this year will grind to a halt for the first time in 60 years, as

the coronavirus crisis takes an "unprecedented" toll on the region's service sector and major export destinations, the International Monetary Fund said yesterday.

Policymakers must offer targeted support to households and firms hardest-hit by travel bans, social distancing policies and other measures aimed at containing the pandemic, said Changyong Rhee, director of the IMF's Asia and Pacific Department. "These are highly uncertain and challenging times for the global economy. The Asia-Pacific region is no exception. The impact of the coronavirus on the region will be severe, across the board, and unprecedented," he told a virtual news briefing conducted with live webcast.

"This is not a time for business as usual. Asian countries need to use all policy instruments in their toolkits." Asia's economy is likely to suffer zero

growth this year for the first time in 60 years, the IMF said in a report on the Asia-Pacific region released yesterday.

The G20 finance ministers and central bankers endorsed "a time-bound suspension of debt service payments for the poorest countries," and in the communique following their virtual meeting, said, "All bilateral official creditors will participate in this initiative." Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan, who currently chairs the group, said this means "poor countries don't need to worry about repaying over the course of the next 12 months."

The initiative will "provide north of \$20 billion of immediate liquidity" for poor countries to use "for their health system and support their people facing COVID-19," he said in a press briefing.

The G20 officials "put our money where our

mouth is, and commit to further support the world as it faces this pandemic," he said.

Powerful response

The International Monetary Fund and World Bank had been calling on the governments to provide debt relief to the countries most in need, and finance ministers from the Group of Seven advanced economies agreed to do so on Tuesday providing the G20, which includes China and Russia, was in favor. The leaders of the IMF and World Bank hailed the announcement, calling it "a powerful, fast-acting initiative that will do much to safeguard the lives and livelihoods of millions of the most vulnerable people." The Washington-based lenders have rushed to roll out emergency financing and have received requests for aid from 100 countries. —Agencies

Business

Reeling states leave jobless Americans waiting for help

At least 17 million Americans pushed out of jobs since mid-March

WASHINGTON: After losing his job last month, Nashawn Cooper waited more than four weeks as the bills piled up and his bank account dwindled to four dollars before the US state of Georgia approved his claim for unemployment benefits.

"I didn't know what I was going to do," Cooper, 36, told AFP in a phone interview from his home in Atlanta after finally being approved. "It feels like they heard my anger... like they felt my frustration and they acted fast on it."

Others are still waiting. With at least 17 million Americans pushed out of their jobs since mid-March by the coronavirus pandemic, state offices that pay unemployed workers cash assistance are drowning in a tsunami of claims—the extent of which will be further revealed in new Labor Department unemployment data set for release later.

Governors across the United States are scrambling to relieve their overburdened bureaucracies as the newly jobless sit at home, watching their bank accounts dwindle and hoping assistance arrives soon.

"At the end of this month, I'm done," said Reuben Isaacson of Boca Raton, Florida, who was laid off from an e-commerce startup last

month. With his unemployment claim pending since the first week of March, the 25-year-old skipped his most recent rent payment and is relying on his mother for money.

"When the moratorium on evictions is lifted and Florida hasn't paid anybody any money, a bunch of people are going to be homeless and that includes me," he said.

Calls for help

It's not just the unprecedented surge in joblessness that's overwhelmed state bureaucracies, said Michele Evermore, senior policy analyst with the National Employment Law Project. Each state runs its own program but follows federal guidelines and receives an allocation from Washington that's based, in part, on the unemployment rate—which last year was at a historically low 3.7 percent.

Yet, administering the benefits "is just not something people think about outside a recession," Evermore said. "No state is handling this comfortably." In New Jersey, the governor has made a public appeal for volunteer programmers skilled in COBOL—a programming language from 1959 that the state and many others still rely on for their administration systems.



WASHINGTON: At least 17 million Americans pushed out of their jobs since mid-March by the coronavirus pandemic.

Near Miami last week, people lined up in their cars and spent hours waiting just so an official could hand them a paper form required to apply for unemployment. The bizarre arrangement was necessary because the state's website

and phone system had buckled under the pressure of so many applicants and the only other option—printing and mailing an application—wasn't feasible because most stores were closed and many people don't own a printer. —AFP

Bank of Canada holds rates as growth plunges

OTTAWA: Canada's central bank held its key lending rate at a record low of 0.25 percent Wednesday, as the economy tanked due to travel restrictions and temporary business closures to fight the coronavirus. The decision comes after three cuts totaling 150 basis points over the past three weeks to try to boost growth.

In a statement, the Bank of Canada forecast an eventual "protracted and uneven" global recovery following "a sudden and deep contraction" caused by containment efforts.

The central bank said economic activity decreased by one to three percent in the first three months of the year and was forecast to drop 15 to 30 percent in the second quarter, when inflation was expected to drop to near zero. It noted an "unprecedented drop in employment" in March with more than one million jobs lost across Canada, and many more workers having reported shorter hours.

By early April some six million Canadians had applied for government assistance, which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Wednesday expanded to include seasonal



OTTAWA: A woman walks past the Bank of Canada building in Ottawa. Canada's central bank held its key lending rate at a record low of 0.25 percent on Wednesday after three cuts totaling 150 basis points over the past three weeks. —AFP

workers and artists.

"You probably need help, and making ends meet," he said. "No matter who you are or where you live. We're in your corner." The announcement came as the COVID-19 death toll in Canada topped 1,000, with more than 28,000 confirmed cases.

Deep into bank 'toolkit'

To support struggling credit markets and ease pressure on Canadian borrowers, the central bank also said it would purchase tens of billions in bonds. "Unable to

lift growth during a public health lockdown, the Bank of Canada is justifiably reaching deeper into its tool kit to keep the economy's pieces in place so that they can be reassembled when the worst of the viral hit has past," commented CIBC analyst Avery Shenfeld. According to Statistics Canada preliminary data, Canada's GDP plunged nine percent in March, dragging down first quarter growth to -2.6 percent.

The estimates marked the biggest one-month GDP drop on record (since 1961), but beat analyst forecasts as low as -11.7 percent for the quarter. —AFP

Oil near 18-year low on demand plunge warning

SINGAPORE: Oil languished at multi-year lows yesterday, with WTI crude remaining around \$20 a barrel as dire warnings about a virus-triggered demand shock overshadowed a deal to cut output.

US benchmark West Texas Intermediate made small gains in Asian afternoon trade to \$20.05 per barrel at one point. It had slipped below the \$20 mark Wednesday, and hit its lowest price in 18 years. International benchmark Brent crude, which also suffered heavy losses a day earlier, rose half a percent to trade at \$28.12 a barrel. Prices have crashed as the coronavirus pandemic saps global demand, with the situation compounded by a supply glut resulting from a price war between OPEC cartel kingpin Saudi Arabia and non-OPEC rival Russia.

A compromise hammered out at the weekend by Riyadh, Moscow and other crude producers to slash output by around 10 million barrels per day briefly boosted prices but the rally soon fizzled out. Investors fear the agreement does not go far enough to offset massive demand losses, as storage capacity around the world shrinks because of the glut. Adding to traders' worries, the International Energy Agency said Wednesday that 2020 was likely to be "the worst year in the history" of the sector.

For 2020 overall, demand will fall by 9.3 million barrels per day (mbd), with April alone down 29 mbd from a year earlier to levels last seen in 1995, the IEA said in its latest monthly report.

Stephen Innes, chief global markets strategist at AxiCorp, however said that the market had found some support in Asian trade Thursday as it was "leaning towards a combination of deeper OPEC+ cuts and a more assured response from the G20 producers to avoid a further collapse in oil". —AFP

Business

Friday, April 17, 2020

US banking giants report gloomy earnings despite strong trading

Market turmoil creates profitable opportunities for large banks in Q1

NEW YORK: Turmoil in financial markets created some profitable opportunities for large banks in the first quarter, but results released Wednesday underscored the darkening prospects for the US economy. Trading divisions at large banks garnered boom-like revenue jumps, while banks also benefitted from a deluge of high-quality companies seeking to raise debt.

But results from Citigroup, Bank of America and Goldman Sachs highlighted that they clearly are preparing for a US recession. All three banks set aside large sums of money in reserve against bad loans, even though it significantly dented profits, reflecting concerns about a possible wave of major defaults amid uncertainty over how long the coronavirus shutdowns will last.

The measures follow similar announcements Tuesday from JPMorgan Chase and Wells Fargo, as executives try to assess how much the unprecedented support from Washington will sustain the US economy as the coronavirus crisis rages. Goldman Sachs Chief Executive David Solomon is telling clients "to hope for the better, but plan for the worst," he said during a conference call with analysts.

"We can all have economic forecasts and we can all talk about the economic consequence of this, but unless people feel safe and secure and confident around the virus, the economic impact will continue in some way, shape or form," Solomon said.

For many clients "it's still going to feel like you're operating in a recession," potentially well into 2021,

even if the US economy is not technically in recession during all of that time, he said.

Range of gloomy scenarios

Citigroup has been testing its loan book against a wide array of economic scenarios, including ones where unemployment reaches 15 percent and US growth contracts by as much as 40 percent, said Chief Financial Officer Mark Mason. "We would imagine those would be severe-type scenarios," Mason told reporters on a conference call, "but we're in touch across our firm to make sure we can manage that."

He said the Citigroup's credit card business saw a decline of 30 percent in sales at the end of the March and "we've continued to see that pressure play through in April." Citigroup set aside around \$7 billion in the first quarter in case of defaults, leading to a 46 percent drop in profits to \$2.5 billion. Revenues rose 12 percent to \$20.7 billion.

Mason said the bank could delay some spending, such as marketing for credit cards, depending on how conditions evolve. Bank of America, the second largest US bank by assets after JPMorgan Chase, set aside \$4.8 billion for potential defaults, \$3.6 billion of which was added in the first quarter. Quarterly profits plunged 48.4 percent from the year-ago period to \$3.5 billion.

The bank has received requests from some one million clients who have sought loan deferrals, about 80 percent on credit cards. About 16 percent of Bank



NEW YORK: Turmoil in financial markets created some profitable opportunities for large banks in the first quarter, but results released Wednesday underscored the darkening prospects for the US economy. —AFP

of America's small business clients have sought deferrals accounting for nearly one-third of the balances for that program, the bank said in an investor presentation.

"We view it as a recessionary outlook," said Paul Donofrio, chief financial officer of Bank of America. "None of the scenarios that we're looking at is for anything other than a recession."

Feast or famine

Meanwhile, Goldman Sachs said profits dropped 49 percent to \$1.1 billion, while revenues dipped one percent to \$8.7 billion. Goldman set aside \$937 million during the quarter to deal with potential defaults, citing "continued pressure in the energy sector and the impact of the Covid-19 on the broader economic environment." —AFP

IMF boss says UK should seek longer Brexit transition

LONDON: Britain should ask for an extension to its post-Brexit transition period to ease uncertainty at a time when the world economy is being hammered by the coronavirus pandemic, the head of the International Monetary Fund said. "It is tough as it is. Let's not make it any tougher," Kristalina Georgieva told BBC radio in comments broadcast yesterday. "My advice would be to seek ways in which this element of uncertainty is reduced in the interests of everybody, of the UK, of the EU, the whole world." The transition period is due to end on Dec. 31, and barriers to exports and imports will go up if a new trade agreement is not reached by then, a challenge which has been made harder by the coronavirus crisis.

Georgieva was speaking after the IMF warned on Tuesday that the world economy is heading for its steepest downturn this year since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In her interview with the BBC, the IMF managing director praised the emergency measures taken by Britain's finance ministry and the Bank of England which she said had been taken "early" and were well-coordinated. "That very strong package of measures is helping the UK, but given the UK's sizeable role in the world economy, it's actually helping everyone," Georgieva said. —Reuters

A comprehensive maintenance plan for flydubai fleet

KUWAIT: Flydubai's grounded fleet has been undergoing a thorough scheduled maintenance program following the announcement from the National Emergency Crisis and Disasters Management Authority (NCEMA) and the General Civil Aviation Authority (GCAA) to suspend all passenger operations until further notice.

The airline has received the guidance issued by the manufacturer to all Next-Generation Boeing 737 operators on scheduled maintenance tasks during the grounding period and has incorporated the additional guidance material into the flydubai approved maintenance program.

flydubai made the decision to split its fleet utilizing its two engineering and maintenance bases. Currently there are 23 Next-Generation Boeing 737-

800 aircraft and 03 Boeing 737 MAX 9 aircraft at Al Maktoum International (DWC) and 15 Next-Generation Boeing 737-800 and 10 Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft at Dubai International (DXB).

The Boeing 737 MAX fleet is being maintained in an Active Storage procedure which means that all systems are kept operational and are exercised and operated during the weekly maintenance checks which takes up to 18 hours per aircraft per week. During the suspension period, the Next-Generation Boeing 737-800 aircraft are kept in Operational Ready status in which the aircraft will be flown at least once either for repatriation flights, cargo flights or maintenance flights. Maintenance flights will operate between Dubai International (DXB) and Al-Maktoum International (DWC).

Commenting on the maintenance program, Mick Hills, Senior Vice President of Engineering and Maintenance at flydubai, said: "our team of highly qualified and experienced engineers are working around the clock to perform the scheduled aircraft maintenance tasks to ensure all our aircraft are maintained to the highest levels of airworthiness in preparation for return to service (RTS). We follow closely the guidance issued by the manufacturer and the authorities to look after our fleet whether in Active Storage as for the MAX aircraft or in Operationally Ready status as for the temporarily grounded Next-Generation Boeing 737-800 aircraft."



Business

APICORP 2019 financial results reflect strong growth momentum

Net income reaches \$112m, balance-sheet grew by 5.7% to \$7.35bn

KUWAIT: The Arab Petroleum Investments Corporation (APICORP), a multilateral development financial institution, on Wednesday disclosed its financial results for the year ended 2019. Building on record performance in 2018, APICORP posted strong results including a 17 percent Y-O-Y increase in net recurring income to \$112 million up from \$96 million (excluding non-recurring items) at year end 2018.

APICORP's strong profitability in 2019 was driven by Corporate Banking and Treasury, whose gross income increased 32 percent and 24 percent Y-O-Y to reach \$201 million and \$80 million, respectively. The Corporation's balance sheet growth remained strong and resilient in 2019, with a 5.7 percent increase from \$6.95 billion to \$7.35 billion from the previous year. Notably, leverage (debt-to-equity ratio) remained in check reaching 2.13 in December 2019 compared to 2.07 in the same period last year, and capital adequacy improved slightly from 29.34 percent in 2018 to 29.6 percent in 2019.

In October 2019, APICORP's overall credit rating was upgraded by Moody's to 'Aa2' with a stable outlook from 'Aa3'. The achievement was due in large part to the steady improvement in APICORP's liquidity and funding profile, high quality assets, strong asset performance, and moderate leverage, amongst other factors. This makes APICORP the only financial institution in the MENA region with a 'Aa2' rating.

Commenting on APICORP's results, Dr Aabed bin Abdulla Al-Saadoun, Chairman of the Board of Directors said: "As the world enters an unprecedented period of economic uncertainty, I am reassured by the fact that we have closed out the past year on a strong note. Our business lines exhibited exceptional resilience on the back of challenging market conditions presented by both geopolitical, financial and industry developments in 2019. The increase in net recurring income by 17 percent and Moody's credit rating upgrade are both significant milestones that stand as a testament to APICORP's solid fundamentals. This gives us the confidence to continue to support to the Arab world's energy sector during a time when sustainable, impact-driven projects have never been more needed."

Dr. Ahmed Ali Attiga, Chief Executive Officer of APICORP, said: "We are extremely proud of another successful year for APICORP as we continue to navigate a rapidly evolving energy landscape. Our balance sheet growth to \$7.35 billion in 2019 paves the way for APICORP to continue an upwards trajectory, notwithstanding the limitations that the current coronavirus crisis poses upon all sectors of the global economy. However, I believe that the work that we have put into diversifying our portfolio in terms of sectors and geography as well as our broad investor base, coupled with our strong financial position, will serve us well in the coming years and allow us to address the current challenges."



**Moody's
upgrade
to 'Aa2' with a
stable outlook**

"When the world eventually begins to recover from the dual impact of the coronavirus pandemic and oil price fluctuations, we will most likely see changes in the region," added Dr. Attiga. "As a trusted financial partner to the regional energy sector, we are well positioned to support sustainable investments, and entities, that can accelerate both economic recovery and the low-carbon transition. Going forward, we believe that there will be a greater role for multilaterals like APICORP, serving in a countercyclical capacity to reinvigorate the economies of the region. For this, we remain committed to playing a strong developmental role, particularly through leveraging on our partnerships in the industry."

A new 5-year corporate strategy

In 2019, APICORP finalized its 2020-2024 corporate strategy to align with the evolving energy landscape. The strategy is underpinned by a more integrated and agile model, with sustainability embedded in all aspects of operations. The corporate strategy for the next five years places APICORP at the center of comprehensive offering to a diverse set of clients enabled by partnerships and innovation to better serve the MENA region's petroleum industries and energy sector.

Business line highlights Corporate Banking

APICORP's Corporate Banking assets increased by 5 percent Y-o-Y to reach \$3.69 billion, all while diversifying the portfolio exposure, geographically and sectorally, as well as maintaining a high quality loanbook. Moreover, Corporate Banking booked \$1.4 billion in

commitments, thereby sustaining the profitability prospects of APICORP not only in 2019, but also future years. In terms of income, Corporate Banking had a record year, reaching \$121 million in income net of Libor and impairments compared with \$90 million in 2018. Fee income continued to show promise, even in a competitive landscape, where it increased 23 percent Y-o-Y. Notably, the Gross NPL Ratio remained very low at 0.38 percent due to strong relationships with APICORP's partners and support from Member Countries.

APICORP continued to evolve its offerings with more focus on private sector-led projects, primarily in the utility sector and trade finance, to complement its strength in government-sponsored projects. In line with its commitment to apply ESG principles to all project financing, APICORP continued its increased focus on environmentally-friendly projects where its presence in the renewables sector was reinforced by its support to several bidders on renewable PPPs in the region as well as a rooftop PV project and a commitment to a Saudi private sector company expanding into a wind farm overseas with private sector partners.

Investments

APICORP continued its prudent strategy of investing alongside like-minded investment partners in qual-



Dr Aabed bin Abdulla Al-Saadoun



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ity businesses with strong management teams and solid growth potential, with a focus on making investments in Member Countries and the broader MENA region, as well as diversifying into opportunities outside the region that offer exceptional profitability prospects and value-addition to the energy sector. The foundation of APICORP's investment approach is adopting a long-term perspective in the extraction of value from its investee companies.

In 2019, APICORP made its first direct equity investment in Kuwait in a leading oil and gas services and facilities management company with a global footprint. It also invested in a specialized wellbore services platform in the UK that serves the oilfield services market. At year end, the total equity portfolio under management stood in excess of \$1 billion across 19 direct and 3 indirect investments. For 2020, APICORP is committed to playing a strong developmental role by way of partnering with key players in the regional and global energy sector, especially in light of the uncertainties created by the coronavirus pandemic.

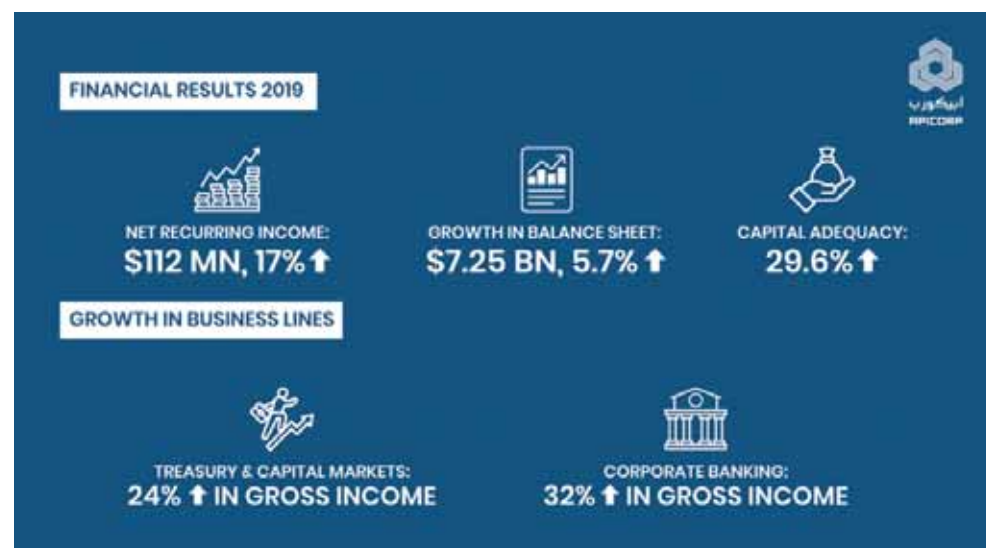
Treasury and capital markets

APICORP's Treasury and Capital Markets continued to strengthen the Corporation's liquidity profile by working to ensure the maintenance of high liquidity ratios, coupled with the rebalancing of the treasury

portfolio towards high-grade fixed income securities. This, in addition to the improved geographical and sectoral diversification in the treasury portfolio as well as to a healthy maturity mismatch position, were fundamental in guaranteeing the soundness and resilience of APICORP's financial standing.

On the liability side, despite market volatility, APICORP reiterated its commitment towards sustainable growth by way of a concerted effort to prioritize the diversification of APICORP's funding base. This resulted in successfully expanding the investor profile to include players outside the GCC. In particular, APICORP's debt capital market issuances saw an increase of investors from Asia and the US. This was manifested by way of eight transactions over the course of the year, including two Formosa Bonds worth USD300 million and USD325 million issued in March and November, respectively, along with several bilateral transactions with European and Asian financial institutions.

While these are unprecedented times due to the impact of the novel coronavirus on all sectors and future petroleum and energy projects, APICORP remains committed to supporting the development and sustainability of its member countries and the wider MENA region amidst the ever-evolving energy landscape.



Sports

Light at the end of tunnel as rescheduled Tour unveiled

Tour de France to be raced from August 29 to Sept 20

PARIS: The Tour de France will be raced from August 29 to September 20, organizers announced on Wednesday, postponing cycling's flagship event originally slated to start on June 27 due to the coronavirus lockdown. The new dates follow French President Emmanuel Macron's extension of a ban on large public gatherings until mid-July. The news comes as a relief to professional cycling teams and fans with four-times Tour winner Chris Froome welcoming a "light at the end of the tunnel" for those suffering under COVID-19 lockdown.

The decision moves the three-week race out of its traditional slot in the summer holidays, when roadside crowds of around 12 million would be expected to gather in festive spirit. It will now finish on the same day the postponed French Open championships starts, September 20, giving a worrying indication of a potential autumn fixture pile-up as more sports seek to reschedule suspended events. Tour director Christian Prudhomme told AFP the new start was based on a double rationale. "We wanted to be as far away from the pandemic as possible," he said. "The president put a July 14 date on public gatherings, but it seemed more reasonable to us to allow the riders time to get into peak condition."

While the dates have changed the original route remains intact, starting in Nice and finishing in Paris. "The Tour is still the Tour. All the challenges we set remain intact," he said of the hotly

anticipated climb-laden route that rarely strays far from the mountains. Britain's Froome said the news came as a boost for all lovers of the sport. "It's the news we have all been waiting for, some light at the end of the tunnel," said the Ineos rider.

"I'm seeing a lot of negativity and despondency on my timeline, I know this period has been tough on all of us, and bike racing is not important in the greater scheme of things. "But let's take hope in that we may return to some sort of normality in the near future." Froome's Ineos teammate Geraint Thomas, who won the Tour in 2018, echoed his thoughts. "It's nice to have that date in your head to at least work towards," Welshman Thomas said in an Instagram live. The new date solves a series of problems after organizers faced up to the reality that the race could never take place on the original dates.

Rescheduling means top cycling teams will survive economically, social distancing will be easier without massive crowds, and the 4,500 strong Tour de France rolling caravan can be more easily put up in hotels outside August. With the Tokyo Games and football's Euro 2020 both delayed by a year, the Tour is the last major event remaining on the summer sports calendar. Elite cycling will breathe a huge sigh of relief as the Tour accounts for most of its earnings. "The Tour represents around 60 percent of earnings in a season," French team AG2R boss Vincent Lavenu said last week.



BRIOUDE: In this file photo, France's Julian Alaphilippe, wearing the overall leader's yellow jersey (center) rides in the pack during the ninth stage of the 106th edition of the Tour de France cycling race between Saint-Etienne and Brioude.— AFP

The Tour will provide a daily fix for deprived sports addicts the world over, with millions of armchair fans able to tune in daily, including those still working from home. The change gives organizers ASO time to stage the warm-up Criterium du Dauphine - held annually ahead of the Tour

but postponed this year as the spring season was swept aside by the illness. Cycling's governing body the UCI has said May's postponed Giro d'Italia would be raced after the Tour de France, and the Vuelta a Espana after that, with dates to be announced in May.— AFP

India seal women's World Cup berth

NEW DELHI: India have qualified for the 2021 women's World Cup after the International Cricket Council declared that the points from a cancelled series against Pakistan would be shared. The series, part of the ICC Women's Championship, was unable to be played after India's governing body, the BCCI, said it could not get government clearance to host Pakistan with tensions rising between the neighbors over the disputed Kashmir region.

The ICC declared the circumstances a "force majeure" event and awarded the teams three points each. Two other final-round series cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic — South Africa v Australia and Sri Lanka v New Zealand - also saw the six points on offer shared. The decision means India sealed the final automatic qualifying spot on 23 points behind Australia (37), holders England (29) and South Africa (25) for the 50-over competition next year alongside hosts New Zealand.

"The technical committee concluded that the (India v Pakistan) series could not be played because of a Force Majeure event," an ICC statement said late Wednesday. "The BCCI demonstrated that it was unable to obtain the necessary government clearances to allow India to participate in the bilateral series against Pakistan." The fierce rivals have not played a bilateral series since 2012-13 when the Pakistan men crossed the border for a series of one-day internationals.

With their decades-old dispute over Kashmir at a new peak, India has stopped all sports teams going to Pakistan and they have only clashed at major international events, such as last year's 50-over men's World Cup in England. Pakistan, who finished four points below India, will now seek one of the three remaining places in the World Cup at a 10-team qualifying tournament in Sri Lanka originally scheduled for July 3-19, but which could be postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.— AFP

All Blacks get 50% pay freeze as virus threatens washout

WELLINGTON: The All Blacks accepted a 50 percent pay freeze yesterday as New Zealand's players' association said it was preparing for the nightmare scenario of no more professional rugby this year. After the coronavirus pandemic shut down global sport, New Zealand Rugby and the players' association agreed to put on hold NZ\$25 million (US\$15 million), or 50 percent of the year's remaining forecast player spend.

The New Zealand government is expected to announce a slight easing of coronavirus restrictions next week, but has warned this will not immediately include a resumption of events which attract crowds. The cutbacks will apply to Super Rugby players, including All Blacks, the women's Black Ferns and the sevens programs, and are designed to protect players on retainers of less than NZ\$50,000.

"The players are committed to playing their part in ensuring the long-term future of the sport and to ensure the game best manages the financial implications of COVID-19," New Zealand Rugby Players' Association chief executive Rob

Nichol said. "In contemplating a scenario based on no professional rugby in 2020, NZR and the NZRPA together recognized the need to act now to prepare the game and the players for this, even if there is every intention of doing all we can to avoid it." The frozen payments will be "waived permanently" if no more rugby is possible this year, but some of them could be reinstated if play restarts, Nichol said.

NZR boss Mark Robinson said the freeze covered the base salary of players, assembly payments and other financial benefits and incentives, as well as reductions in player-funded welfare and development activities. "The players signaled their desire to play their part right from the get-go and the conversations over the past few weeks have been very constructive. It was vital the sport was ready for whenever we can get back on the field," he said.

The New Zealand pay freeze was announced as neighboring Rugby Australia indicated it too was close to a deal following several weeks of negotiations with players.— AFP

Sports

Qatar confirms first virus cases at World Cup sites

Gulf nation reports a total of 7 deaths; 3711 COVID-19 infections

DOHA: Qatar has reported that five coronavirus cases have been detected in workers at three World Cup stadiums, the first confirmed instances among those involved in 2022 tournament projects. The Gulf nation has reported a total of seven deaths, 3,711 COVID-19 infections and 406 recoveries since March 6 but had not previously disclosed any positive tests from workers at World Cup sites.

"The Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (SC) has confirmed that two staff members who work for an SC Contractor on the Al-Thumama Stadium project have tested positive for COVID-19," organisers said in a statement to AFP. "In addition, three workers, one working on the Al-Rayyan Stadium project and two on the Al-Bayt Stadium project have tested positive."

Qatar is building seven new stadiums for the tournament, one of which has officially opened, while one existing venue was refurbished ahead of 2022. The SC was following health ministry

guidance to respond to the cases and all those affected would continue to be paid and receive free healthcare, the statement added.

The timings of the competition, due to be held in November and December of 2022, remain unchanged by the coronavirus pandemic which has already forced the postponement of the European football championships and the Tokyo Olympics. Both will now take place in 2021. Building work for the stadiums and infrastructure to host the global soccer spectacle has continued through the crisis even as non-essential retail has been halted and mosques, parks and restaurants have closed.

Precautionary measures

The SC said workers with symptoms are examined on site with suspected cases reported and referred for testing at accredited hospitals, the only establishments authorized to undertake the process. "Those that have tested positive will

be monitored on an ongoing basis by medical professionals and will stay in quarantine for 14 days," the statement said. "Those who came into close contact with the confirmed cases of COVID-19 are also in 14 day isolation, as a precautionary measure."

The statement did not say that work had been suspended at any of the affected stadiums. Laborers at several non-SC construction sites across Doha have continued to work in close proximity, AFP has seen, despite strict government social distancing rules. At one development close to the National Museum, a dozen workers—some unmasked—crowded close together to weld steel supports over the weekend. The Labor Ministry said on Monday that it had issued a penalty to a contractor for failing to operate its worker transport buses at the compulsory half capacity.

Authorities said they had received 1,328 complaints from workers on a newly opened com-

plaint hotline for reporting breaches of virus rules and exploitation by employers. Tens of thousands of workers are strictly confined to Doha's Industrial Area after dozens in the blue-collar district tested positive for the virus last month. Officials have said they are now considering easing the lockdown after undertaking widespread testing, detection and treatment in the area.

Advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty warn that cramped accommodation and inadequate sanitation endanger migrant workers across the Gulf, who may not have access to healthcare. Qatar has assured migrant laborers that anyone who fears they have coronavirus will receive free treatment and has guaranteed that those under quarantine will continue to receive wages. Ninety percent of Qatar's 2.75 million people are expats. Many are from developing countries and working on projects linked to the tournament. — AFP

Brazil's Ronaldinho enjoys 'golden cell'

ASUNCION: With Paraguay's capital in lockdown, former Brazil soccer star Ronaldinho is spending his second week under house arrest in an exclusive hotel in Asuncion, where a ballroom has been set up to allow him to keep up his soccer skills, as he awaits trial for entering the country under a false passport. The 40-year-old World Cup winner and his business-manager brother Roberto are occupying two \$350-a-night suites at the otherwise deserted Colonial-style Palmaroga hotel, just a couple of blocks from the government headquarters.

"Yesterday they brought him a regulation football. We set up a room—about 30 meters by 15 — for him to be able to practice his juggling skills," hotel manager Emilio Yegros said. "He seems like a good sort. He always has a smile, like his brother," said Yegros. "His face has changed from his first day here. When he arrived he was tense and visibly stressed," the hotel manager said. The former Barcelona star spends his days working out in the hotel gym, practicing his legendary juggling skills with the ball, and wandering the echoing halls of the 6,000 square-meter (64,000 square-foot) building, refurbished in 2019.

Lunch with 'Ronhi'

Ronaldinho and his brother are among 16 suspects in an extensive anti-corruption investigation. Arrested on March 6 for using falsified Paraguayan passports to enter the country from neighboring Brazil, they face up to five years in prison if convicted. Being held in a police cell for the first 30 days of their detention gave Ronaldinho—his beard grown fuller in that time—and his brother a taste of Paraguayan prison conditions, before a court ordered them released into house arrest at the Palmaroga early this month.

Bail was set at \$1.6 million. The fact that the hotel is owned by



ASUNCION: View of a courtyard at the hotel where Brazilian football star Ronaldinho Gauchó and his brother are keeping house arrest in Asuncion. — AFP

the Spain-based Barcelona Group, which has construction projects in Paraguay, is "pure coincidence" and has nothing to do with the star's former club, said Yegros. The former player is prevented from receiving visitors in the hotel under Paraguay's protocols against the coronavirus, which officially has 161 infections to date, with eight deaths.

'Abusive and illegal'

Ronaldinho's Brazilian lawyer Sergio Queiroz says there are no legal grounds for his detention. "It's illegal, abusive," he said. "They did not know that the documents they had were illegal." "Leave Ronaldinho alone," said former Argentine World Cup winner Jorge Valdano, now a coach in Spain. "The only place Ronaldinho behaved like a troublemaker was on the pitch," he told a Madrid newspaper. "One thing is being stupid, as his lawyer called him, and another thing is being a criminal." — AFP

Fan Zhiyi, the Chinese cult hero who 'rejected Liverpool, Newcastle'

SHANGHAI: Fan Zhiyi says he turned down a Liverpool offer made by Gerard Houllier in a pub and also rejected Newcastle United, while a trial at Tottenham Hotspur was torpedoed by injury. But does the 50-year-old known as "General Fan" in China have any regrets? Not for a second, because he became a cult hero at Crystal Palace and represented his country at their only World Cup in 2002, although injury badly hampered his tournament.

Speaking to AFP in Shanghai, Fan remembers how he caught the eye of then-England manager Terry Venables and how his Palace team-mates often tried to lure him to the pub, while describing his enduring affection for the "charm" of English football. It was at a pub that, according to Fan, then-Liverpool manager Houllier met his agent and wanted to sign the Chinese trailblazer. It was January 2001 and a Palace side with Fan at the heart of the defense had beaten a Liverpool team containing Steven Gerrard and Michael Owen 2-1 in the home leg of the League Cup semi-finals.

"After the game, in the pub, he spoke with my agent and said, 'Can I talk to you about Fan?'" Fan says. However, Fan was determined to play for his country and he says Liverpool — like Newcastle, who also made him an offer — wanted to limit his time with the national side. "It was very difficult. Many people called me silly for giving up a better opportunity, better wages and probably more fame," Fan says. "But I had to make a choice and the choice has to be for my country because they always backed me, pushed me and gave me the chance." — AFP

Sports

Saudi takeover promises new dawn for Newcastle at a cost

Potential £300 million takeover presents a different dilemma

LONDON: Newcastle United fans have long dreamed of ridding the club from owner Mike Ashley, but a potential £300 million (\$377 million) takeover backed by the Saudi sovereign wealth fund presents fans on Tyneside with a different dilemma. Retail tycoon Ashley has been deeply unpopular in his 13 years in charge of Newcastle, during which time the club have twice been relegated from the Premier League before bouncing back into English football's lucrative top flight.

British financier Amanda Staveley has held a long-running interest in brokering a deal for one of England's most passionately supported clubs with attendances often above 50,000 despite years of limited success. Ashley labeled Staveley a "waste of time" when a previous bid to take control collapsed in 2017.

However, documents filed last week to Companies House provide a framework for talks be-

tween Staveley's PCP Capital Partners and Ashley. According to reports, 80 percent of the deal would be funded by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund with Staveley providing 10 percent and the other 10 percent coming from British billionaire brothers David and Simon Reuben. The Toon Army have long voiced their dissent as Ashley has tried to cash in on the riches of Premier League television rights deals, whilst investing little on improving the team on the pitch.

"There was a famous banner a couple of years ago that read: 'We don't demand a team that wins, we demand a club that tries.' For the last 13 years we haven't had a club that has tried," a spokesman for the Newcastle United Supporters Trust (NUST) told AFP. "Under this ownership there has been no ambition, effectively no investment and no hope for a sporting entity that hasn't been a sporting entity. It's been

there to survive and nothing more."

The prospect of deep-pocketed owners, particularly at a time when most other clubs will be cutting back due to the economic crisis caused by coronavirus, is an alluring one for the Magpie faithful. Indeed, a £40 million drop in Ashley's asking price since talks began in January is believed to be linked to the falling value of football assets due to a shutdown caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Manchester City's run of 11 major trophies since an Abu Dhabi takeover in 2008 transformed their fortunes is an example of the difference wealthy Middle Eastern owners can make.

Prior to 2011, City had not won a major honor since 1976. Newcastle's barren run stretches back to 1969. "They are looking for someone to come in with fresh investment and to get them back where they should be, which is the top end of the Premier League and maybe the Champi-

ons League," former Newcastle manager Graeme Souness told Sky Sports. However, selling out to Saudi investment will see Newcastle become the latest target of criticism over the state's use of sport to distract from its human rights record.

"In recent months, Saudi Arabia has worked hard at 'sportswashing' its reputation - trying to use the glamour of sport as a public relations tool to improve its international image," said an Amnesty International report in February. A world heavyweight title fight between Anthony Joshua and Andy Ruiz in December and the Spanish Super Cup a month later received strong criticism for taking the millions offered to participate in Saudi Arabia. "It is something we need to be aware of," added the NUST spokesman. "We need to see the specific details of who is involved once it is confirmed. It is only natural there are concerns." — AFP

Trump eager to 'get sports back'; league chiefs remain wary

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump is hankering for a return of live sports action, but US league supremos are taking a cautious approach to competition amid the coronavirus pandemic. "We have to get our sports back," Trump said Tuesday. "I'm tired of watching baseball games that are 14 years old." Sports in America, like the rest of the world, have been brought to a virtual standstill by COVID-19. The NBA shut down on March 11 after Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert tested positive for the virus, and the NHL, Major League Soccer and the US PGA Tour quickly followed suit.

Major League Baseball's 2020 season, due to start March 26, is on hold, as is the LPGA tour and motor racing, while the NFL is just hoping it will be able to start its season on time in September. The dearth of sports has led to a wealth of speculation as to when and how competition could resume. The NBA and NHL are wrestling with how they might fashion credible ends to campaigns that were heading into their final stages.

Baseball, meanwhile, was reported to be considering sequestering 30 teams in Arizona-or perhaps Arizona and Florida-to open the season playing games in empty ballparks. One ESPN reporter said he'd even heard it suggested that MLB might try to launch its season in Japan. The NHL was reportedly mulling a single-venue re-start in North Dakota, while Dana White, head of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, indicated he was considering holding mixed martial arts cards on a private island.

"From our perspective we don't have a plan, we have lots of ideas," MLB commissioner Rob Manfred said in a television interview on Tuesday. "What ideas come to fruition will depend on what the restrictions are, what the public health situation is." His comments echoed those of NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and NBA commissioner Adam Silver, who have both said that the uncertain-



WASHINGTON: Photo shows a detailed view of a MLS soccer ball at Audi Field in Washington, DC. Major League Soccer said it's hope for return in mid-May looked "extremely unlikely," acknowledging it might not be possible to play its full season. — AFP

ties surrounding the spread of coronavirus make it impossible to make firm plans.

The refrain of all sports leaders has therefore been they are considering "all options," including playing without fans in attendance. That could get live sports back on television, at least, although Trump indicated that he's keen for more. "We want people actually sitting next to each other at ball games, eventually," he said. "We're not going to rip out every other seat in baseball stadiums and football stadiums." In the United States, however, the return of thousands of fans to sports venues could depend on the greenlight from state authorities. California governor Gavin Newsom said Tuesday that the prospect of mass gatherings in the state is "negligible at best" until a vaccine is available. In a state that is home to nearly 20 major pro franchises, Newsom said that "large-scale events that bring in hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of strangers altogether across every conceivable difference, health and otherwise, is not in the cards based upon our current guidelines and current expectations." — AFP

Sports can come back but without fans: Fauci

LOS ANGELES: The top US health and infectious disease specialist says the key to reopening professional sports leagues in America is to have the athletes play games in front of empty stadiums. Anthony Fauci, who is helping coordinate the US response to the global coronavirus pandemic, said reliable antibody testing and fast results are also crucial to the return of sports. "There's a way of doing that," Fauci told US Snapchat show "Good Luck America." "Nobody comes to the stadiums. Put (athletes) in big hotels, wherever you want to play.

"Keep them very well-surveilled, but have them tested like every week and make sure they don't wind up infecting each other or their families, and just let them play the season out." Professional sports leagues are in gridlock due to the pandemic that has so far killed nearly 28,000 Americans.

The National Basketball Association is pondering a similar model for getting their 2019-20 season restarted in either Las Vegas or the Bahamas.

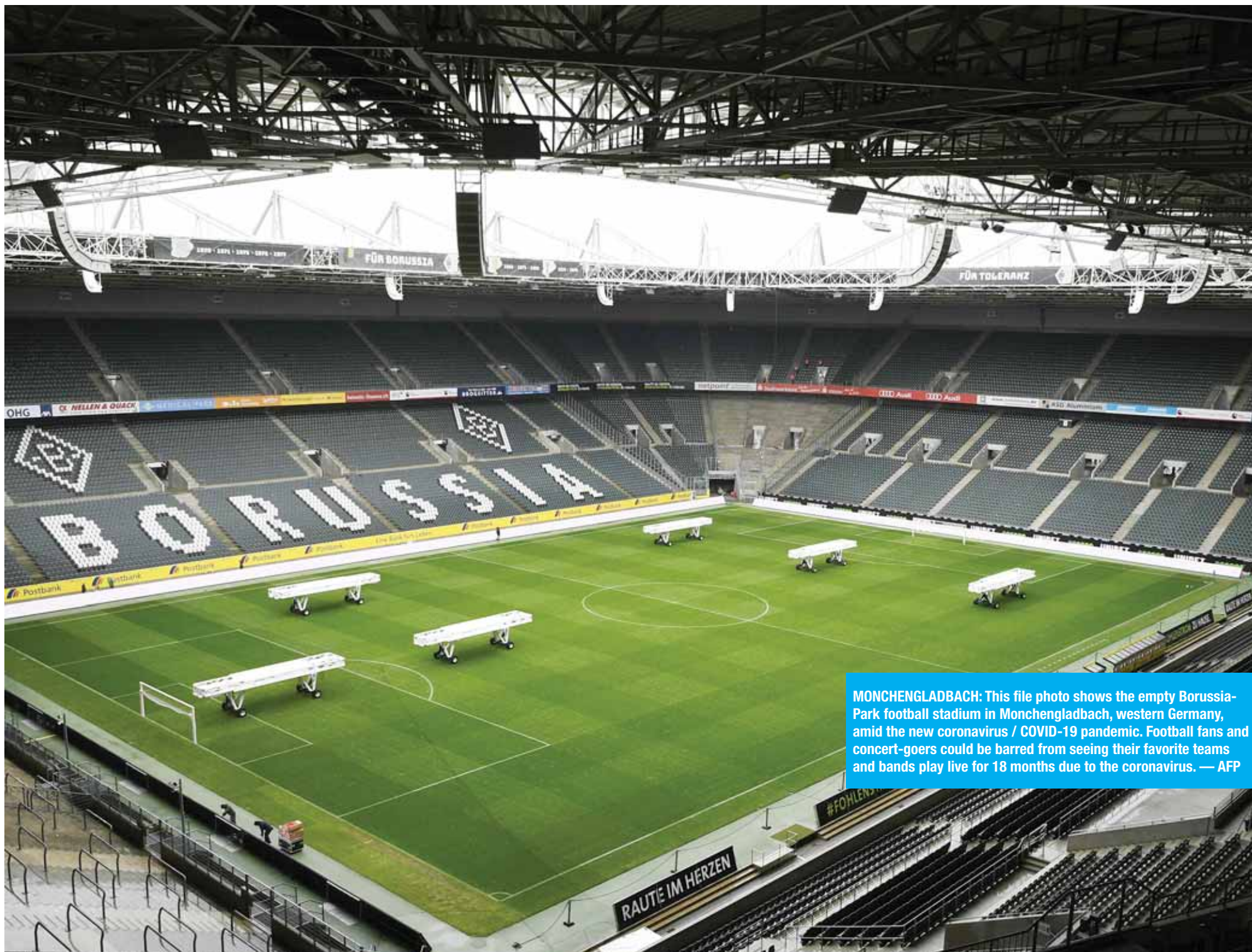
The NBA shut down on March 11 after Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert tested positive for the virus, and the National Hockey League, Major League Soccer and the Professional Golfers' Association Tour quickly followed suit. The PGA is reportedly considering a return on June 11 without fans in attendance, starting with a tournament in Fort Worth, Texas, which was originally scheduled for the weekend of May 21-24.

The matches would not be played in front of fans, and the PGA may have to play on gallery-free courses for at least the months of June and July. Eight Tour events were postponed on March 17. The PGA Championship and Masters were rescheduled for later in the season. Major League Baseball's 2020 season, which was due to start March 26, is on hold, as is the LPGA tour and motor racing, while the National Football League is just hoping it will be able to start its season on time in September.—AFP

Sport Times

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MONCHENGLADBACH: This file photo shows the empty Borussia-Park football stadium in Mönchengladbach, western Germany, amid the new coronavirus / COVID-19 pandemic. Football fans and concert-goers could be barred from seeing their favorite teams and bands play live for 18 months due to the coronavirus. — AFP

Sports can come back but 'without the fans'

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