

Muslims face a Ramadan like never before amid pandemic

Mideast braces for bleak fasting month as virus threat lingers

2 deaths, 80 new cases; Hashem wants expats out

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The health ministry yesterday reported 80 new coronavirus (COVID-19) infections in the last 24 hours, bringing total infections to 1,995, while two deaths were reported, bringing the total fatalities to nine. During its daily briefing, Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said 39 patients are in intensive care, 26 of them are in critical condition.

Those currently receiving treatment at hospitals reached 1,619 patients, Sanad said. The new death cases are of a 49-year-old Bangladeshi male and a 55-year-old Indian male - both were receiving treatment in intensive care units. Earlier yesterday, Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced the recovery of 62 patients, bringing the total to 367 recoveries.

Continued on Page 16

CAIRO/JAKARTA/RIYADH: Days before the holy fasting month of Ramadan begins, the Islamic world is grappling with an untimely paradox of the new coronavirus pandemic: Enforced separation at a time when socializing is almost sacred. The holiest month in the Islamic calendar is one of family and togetherness - community, reflection, charity and prayer. But with shuttered mosques, coronavirus curfews and bans on mass prayers from Senegal to Southeast Asia, some 1.8 billion Muslims are facing a Ramadan like never before.

Across the Muslim world the pandemic has generated new levels of anxiety ahead of the holy fasting month, which begins on Friday. In Algiers, Yamine Hermache, 67, usually receives relatives and neighbors at her home for tea and cold drinks during the month that Muslims fast from dusk till dawn. But this year she fears it will be different. "We may not visit them, and they will not come," she said, weeping. "The coronavirus has made everyone afraid, even of distinguished guests."

In a country where mosques have been closed, her husband Mohamed Djemoudi, 73, worries about something else. "I cannot imagine Ramadan with-



CAIRO: Egyptians look at traditional lanterns known in Arabic as "fawanees" sold for the holy month of Ramadan in the Sayeda Zainab neighborhood on Sunday. — AFP

out taraweeh," he said, referring to additional prayers performed at mosques after iftar, the evening meal in which Muslims break their fast. In Jordan the government, in coordination

with neighboring Arab countries, is expected to announce a fatwa outlining what Ramadan rituals will be permitted, but for millions of Muslims, it already feels so different.

From Africa to Asia, the coronavirus has cast a shadow of gloom and uncertainty. Millions are locked down across the Middle East - from Saudi Arabia

Continued on Page 16

V O L V O

STAY SAFE STAY HOME



Home quarantine procedures approved by health minister

Symptomatic citizens transferred to institutional quarantine

Wellbeing amidst the pandemic

local spotlight

By Sadie Hussain

With more than 20 percent of the world's population on lockdown, it goes without saying that the outbreak of COVID-19 or the "Pandemic" has impacted us all in different ways and on varying scales. Feelings of fear, anxiety and dejection as a result of the constant alerts and coverage surrounding the spread are understandable. This is an unprecedented scenario: stress and the feelings associated with it are by no means a reflection of your adequacy. In fact, feeling under pressure may be a likely experience for you and many of your loved ones. Managing your psychosocial wellbeing during this time is just as important as managing your physical health.

Many, if not all of us, have heard the important rule on flight safety "put on your own oxygen mask before helping others." This is just an example to remind us of the importance of self-care. If you cannot take care of yourself, you cannot take care of others including your loved ones. By incorporating certain activities into our daily lives, we offer our body and mind the time to rest, reset, and rejuvenate; so to avoid the symptoms of stress and anxiety. The following may be practiced to support and enhance wellbeing, particularly during this time.

Responsible contribution

Be mindful not to act in ways that contribute to the widespread panic. This hinders all efforts in managing the outbreak. One groundless act could lead to sensationalizing the issues that are being faced worldwide.

Rather, ensure you are following directives issued by the Kuwaiti government and medical officials. Your contribution starts in observing and maintaining good hygiene habits and adhering to the curfew. Focus on other positive contributions that you can make, such as limiting your exposure to others. Consider your self-isolation as an act of love.

Media exposure

In a digital age, with instant access to information in the palm of our hands, it is difficult to escape the threat of the Pandemic residing in your thoughts. Whilst it is great to stay informed, manage your exposure to media coverage in order to avoid obsessing and reaching pointless speculation as this can unwittingly increase feelings of fear and anxiety. Living in a constant state of stress where you cannot stop thinking of the Pandemic means you are putting your body into permanent 'fight or flight' mode, which studies have proven to be damaging to both physical and psychological health and wellbeing. Always be mindful of the source of the information you seek and ensure you access and share only reputable information.

Studies have also found that you are more susceptible to the effects of bad news within the first 30 minutes of waking up. Try to take your time to enjoy your morning and set a positive tone for the day before you sit down to catch up on the news.

The above advice should not be considered as a comprehensive report or medical advice concerning issues that may affect physical and mental wellbeing.



KUWAIT: A Kuwaiti national shows the tracking bracelet provided by authorities as she leaves the Kuwait International Airport upon her return as part of a repatriation plan on Sunday, and ahead of being taken to mandatory home quarantine.



Kuwaiti nationals leave the Kuwait International Airport upon their return as part of a repatriation plan Sunday.— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah issued a ministerial decision Sunday to adopt the necessary mechanism to implement "home quarantine procedures", in a manner that ensures the preservation of health and safety to all. The decision is within the framework of efforts and measures taken by the ministry to confront the spread of coronavirus, known as COVID-19. The mechanism, according to the decision paper, includes procedures to be followed by the person in home quarantine.

One of the main aspects of the decision is to ensure choosing a separate room from the rest of the family, preferably a separate floor, with a separate bathroom, and if a separate bathroom is not available, a shared bathroom must be cleaned after each use. Among the procedures also is making sure to open windows, ventilating the room continuously, not mixing with the rest of the family at home, refraining from receiving visitors and not leaving the quarantine area. In the event of any medical emergency, those in quarantine can call the designated number from by ministry, which is (151).

Usage of phone is essential when you need to communicate with anyone at home, including responding to emails for daily follow-up regarding health symptoms and temperature and not to share your personal belongings with anyone, and ensure that it is clean and sterilized. The procedures emphasized the continuous sterilization of surfaces and door handles, not sharing towels with other people at home. The procedures, among other things, also focused on eating separately and not with the family members. The minister's decision also stressed ensuring that adequate medical supplies are available at home in the event of suffering from a chronic illness.

The decision also highlighted procedures that must be followed by family members and other residents with the person in the home quarantine. The minister noted that quarantined individuals must use the smartphone application 'Shlonik' to follow their status or situation at home, and to be able to communicate with them and check on their health and make sure they adhere to home quarantine procedures. The decision also assigned teams by the Ministry of Health that will make unannounced visits to quarantine individuals, and a report will be prepared from doctors or health inspectors on each case.

Institutional quarantine

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health said Sunday that among the citizens who recently arrived in the country,



42 were transferred to compulsory institutional quarantine on suspicion of coronavirus symptoms, while 1,187 were converted to home quarantine. Health Ministry's Assistant Undersecretary for Technical Affairs and General Supervisor of Medical Examination Centers at Kuwait International Airport Dr Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi affirmed that four cases were transferred to complete their treatment in the hospitals for other health reasons. Mutairi stated that the total number of citizens who were on the first 11 evacuation flights amounted to 1,233.

Kuwait Airways on Sunday operated a total 12 flights to bring overseas nationals back to Kuwait due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) worldwide. The incoming flights, which are part of a three-day repatriation plan, include three from Riyadh, three from Manama, two from each Abu Dhabi and Dubai and one from each Muscat and Doha. The national carrier stands properly prepared for the "grand repatriation" process since it has harnessed all its energies to bring in Kuwaiti nationals abroad, the airline's Board Chairman Yousef Al-Jassem said in a statement. "Kuwait Airways is keen on playing its due part in this regard, given that it is the main national carrier of the State," he said. The airline has some 40 flights to run in the first three days of the repatriation period.

The Cabinet had adopted a phased process to bring back Kuwaiti citizens abroad. The plan envisages five phases: the first started today and lasts until Tuesday, covering Kuwaitis who completed medical treatment abroad along with their companions, also tourists or those who were on official assignments. The second stage (April 23) covers patients who need medical beds and life support equipment. The third one (April 25-May 1) targets students, the fourth (May 3-4) for diplomats and the fifth (May 6-7) for other segments.—KUNA

News in brief

Special flights to Europe

KUWAIT: Kuwait continues to offer limited out-bound flights to expatriates wishing to go home. Kuwait Airways announced it will operate special flights to London on April 20-21, 2020 - exclusively for UK nationals/residents and EU citizens - and special flights to Geneva on April 21, 2020 - exclusively for EU citizens. The one way flight costs around KD 252.75. As for Qatar Airways, two daily flights from Kuwait to selected destinations via Doha, will leave Kuwait till May 30, 2020.

Hunger strike

KUWAIT: Responding to a video posted on Twitter showing some of the Egyptians accommodated in Kabd pending evacuation, who had been allegedly on hunger strike for two days in an attempt to force the Egyptian embassy to act and accelerate returning them to Egypt, Kuwait Times contacted an official at the embassy to inquire about the incident. The Egyptian embassy official said: "Only a few of the Egyptians went on hunger strike for just an hour. It is over now and we are fully confident in the measures taken by our brothers in the Kuwaiti ministry of interior."

Shops reopening

KUWAIT: Minister of Municipality Affairs Waleed Al-Jassim tweeted that he gave instructions to Kuwait Municipality's executive apparatus to prepare a mechanism to enable car repair shops at co-operative societies to reopen, while complying with health ministry instructions, in order to allow people to repair vehicles under the current circumstances.

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 1,995 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), in addition to nine deaths. With the exception of 39 cases in intensive care, all infected cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while hundreds have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 367 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, the ministry said. There are 1,619 people receiving treatment and 1,367 quarantined as of yesterday. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested thousands of people. Meanwhile, Kuwait requires all expatriates who arrived from travel on March 1 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center to test people for possible infection.

Curfew

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

Precautions

Kuwait halted all commercial flights until further notice, and has sent special flights to repatriate Kuwaitis back home from countries affected with the virus' spread. All arrivals to Kuwait from all countries are to be placed under compulsory institutional quarantine for 14 days,

during which the person is monitored, and prescribed health procedures are applied, the health ministry said. Meanwhile, the Cabinet announced on April 9 the operation of all airline flights for expats who are wishing to return back to their countries. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to April 23, with work resuming on April 26, while entities providing vital services will remain open. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended classes for March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs); first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29, before eventually suspending schools until August for grade 12 and October for other stages.

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

Amnesty

The Interior Ministry issued an amnesty allowing residency violators to leave the country between April 1 and April 30 without paying any fines or airfare with a chance to return to Kuwait later. The amnesty was issued in view of the circumstances the country is currently going through and as part of the precautionary measures taken to fight the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Individuals desiring to procure valid residencies in Kuwait and are willing to pay the fines without being subjected to investigations will be allowed to pay the fines and legalize their status if they meet the required conditions.

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

The Interior Ministry later opened two new locations in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh to receive residency violators from

all nationalities: Female violators are received at Roufayda Al-Aslameya School - Block 4 - Street 200, while male violators are received at Naem bin Masod School - Block 4 - Street 250.

Hotlines

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

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

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

Medicine delivery

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

- Amiri Hospital: 50880699
- Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital: 50880755
- Farwaniya Hospital: 50880852
- Adan Hospital: 50880908
- Jahra Hospital: 50881066
- Sabah Hospital: 97632660
- Jaber Hospital: 96992079
- Ibn Sina Hospital: 99613948
- Chest Hospital: 99258749
- Razi Hospital: 97633487
- Kuwait Cancer Control Center: 96735242

- Psychiatric Hospital: 97350113
- Physiotherapy Hospital: 99824037
- Maternity Hospital: 98559531
- As'ad Al-Hamad Dermatology Center: 98514508
- Zain Hospital: 97552031
- NBK Hospital: 96931761
- Al-Rashed Allergy Hospital: 94162470
- Infectious Diseases Hospital: 96989164
- Palliative Care Hospital: 94024786
- Sabah Al-Ahmad Urology Center: 90952469
- KFH Addiction Treatment Center: 94169363

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

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

Mental health assistance

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

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

Local

28 days of solitude: A Kuwaiti returnee's journey back home



KUWAIT: A flight attendant in a protective suite walks through aisle inside the plane. —Photos by Fajer Ahmed



Interior Ministry personnel lined up outside the plane.



Passengers sit inside a tent to fill health ministry forms upon arrival.



A copy of the health ministry form to be filled by all passengers upon arrival.

By Fajer Ahmed

I am grateful that I was one of the first people to return to Kuwait, as part of the biggest eviction plan for Kuwaiti citizens. My initial trip to Abu Dhabi was planned for 10 days, but because of COVID-19, I was only able to return this week, making the trip a total of 57 days. I am now in 28 days of solitude in my own apartment. I am not allowed to leave or have guests, or interact with my family that lives in the other areas of the house. I am very grateful for this time of reflection.

The process to fly back was actually very organized and simple:

1) Request to come back - I registered on a website filling out important details, like my medical history. <http://withyou.e.gov.kw/>

2) Collecting information - I got instructions to download an app called Shlonik, so that the ministry of health can monitor my location.

3) Flight details - We were not allowed any carry-on luggage but were allowed two bags of 32 kilos each (such a relief cause I was worried we would be getting 20 kg).

4) Boarding - I went to Abu Dhabi international airport, but no one was at the airport except the Kuwaitis on my flight. We checked in and boarded as you would on a usual flight, which was a little strange, because all stores/gates at the airport were closed.

5) Flying - Every seat had a bag with gloves, masks, sanitizer, a mobile chip and a small meal. The flight was full, with the only empty seat next to me. It was a bumpy flight, but everyone was so happy to fly back.

6) Arrival - We were escorted out of the plane one by one. We then sat in a tent as if we were in a classroom taking an exam. We were told to check our phones and make sure the Shlonik app was working.

7) Activating our bracelets - We were then escorted to another area, where they registered our in-

formation, like any symptoms we had, and where we would be quarantined. They then put on us a bracelet with a chip that monitors our location.

8) Getting tested - The test was painful for me, although many people had a different experience. It was a swab that they stuck all the way up the nose. I get my results in two days.

I am very grateful to the Kuwaiti government and the frontliners that made sure that we got home and stayed safe. I now have to legally stay in solitude for 28 days, as no one else was traveling with me. Being alone though does not mean being lonely. Being alone is a time to reflect.

I also think that the best thing we can do in a time of crisis is ask ourselves what we can learn from this. Here is what I learned from COVID-19

- That calling this a crisis and letting fear take over does not really help anyone.

- So much good is happening right now, because of COVID-19.

- So many people who were stuck in Kuwait without jobs and could not afford to go home because of visa violations are getting the chance to go home now, while violators are being prosecuted.

- Our environment in Kuwait is getting cleaner. The weather is very cool for April.

- Taking the time to stay at home and reflect on our lives and where we are going is the break we all wanted.

- Most of us are spending more time with family. I think we should choose to celebrate the good things that come out of COVID-19.

Also one other note: So many people made sure I came to Kuwait safe, including expats, so hearing that expats are the ones bringing or passing on the virus is not a nice way to say or think. Frontliners are both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti, and that is how our community has always been. Flight attendants, nurses, doctors, ground staff and security guards were all both Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis at the same time.

Minister, KU union mull e-learning

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Saud Al-Harbi recently met members of the National Union of Kuwaiti Students - Kuwait University branch (NUKS - KU) to discuss some issues including the latest de-

velopments concerning the education process at Kuwait University in view of the global health crisis the world is going through as a result of the spread of COVID-19. Harbi said he discussed various issues with the union members, noting that he sensed the union members' great sense of responsibility towards fellow students and their academic future.

Harbi also reaffirmed the ministry's keenness on the future of students, adding that the ministry is currently reviewing various options to ensure students' best interests are protected. "We are undoubtedly keen on students' health, safety and academic future. We also reassure them that we are working 24/7 for their best interests and we will get through this crisis and

celebrate their graduation," Harbi underscored. In addition, Harbi hailed the union's contributions in voluntary work and expressed his pride and faith in Kuwait University students.

Kuwait University's branch of NUKS stressed that the meeting included discussing the need to resume schooling and not to impede or suspend it, while prioritizing students' health and safety, in addition to setting and approving online education soon, taking into consideration students' best interests and the best assessment system to be used with this form of education. The union also reaffirmed its full support to the procedures taken by the Cabinet since the beginning of the crisis to maintain citizens' health and safety.

In my view

Coronavirus and martial law

By Dr Fatma Khaled Almohsen

With the fact that the number of coronavirus-infected cases in Kuwait continues to rise despite the curfew imposed and the prediction for this number to sharply grow with the expected arrival of evacuated citizens, voices have recently wondered if the government would declare martial law. These talks pushed me to write this article and demonstrate legal dimensions of the aforementioned law according to the Kuwaiti constitution with the hope the government will not feel compelled to use this serious authority.

Article no. 69 of the Kuwaiti constitution states His Highness the Amir shall proclaim martial law in case of a necessity which should be determined by a statutory law that is to be issued. Accordingly, in 1967, statute law no. 22/1967 was issued regulating the declaration of martial law. Its first article defines what the constitution calls a "case of necessity" - martial law could be declared whenever general security is exposed to danger.

Here, I shall pause and ask those promoting placing the state under martial rule, whether the coronavirus pandemic in Kuwait now could be measured as threatening general security. For me, as I recall the legal consequences of this law, I wish the answer to the question would be 'No'.

Article 3 of law no. 22/1967 lists expanded extraordinary authorities that can be practiced by the governor appointed by His Highness the Amir during martial rule. Closely examining those authorities can easily lead to the conclusion that they hinder the practice of the most important freedoms regulated by the constitution.

This law gives the martial governor the right to conduct full inspections of people and places at any time, restricting people's travel to specific areas. It also gives the governor the right to ban any public gathering and reinforce it even by force. The governor can also deport non-Kuwaitis immediately and bring different means of transport and buildings that are privately owned into state possession.

What might be the most glaring among all these procedures (that are given just as an example) is that civilian courts would stop and be replaced by military courts. This all justifies the constitution's approach in demanding the referral to the parliament within 15 days following the issuance of the martial law for a decision on its continuity.

Moreover, in case parliament is dissolved, it shall be referred to the new Assembly in its first sitting. In conclusion, although Kuwait twice declared martial law, I hope that the coronavirus pandemic will not spread to the extent that the government will repeat the experience for the third time in its history.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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Local

Manila distributes cash assistance to jobless Filipinos, delivers food

\$200 to Filipinos who are jobless or not being paid by employers

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The Philippine Embassy in Kuwait announced Manila's cash assistance program to help Filipinos in dire need during the lockdown caused by COVID-19. The embassy will hand over cash amounting to \$200 to Filipinos who were terminated or abandoned by their employers, are currently jobless or are not being paid by employers. Since the start of the partial lockdown in Kuwait on March 1, a number of Filipinos have been appealing for help.

"This is not unique to Kuwait - this problem is global. We have millions of Filipinos around the world calling for embassy assistance. Of course we cannot turn our back to this request - that is why our Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello, with the authorization of our President Rodrigo Duterte, came up with the program to help ease the burden of our people through cash assistance while waiting for normalcy. We have funds being disbursed at every post to ease the burden of Filipinos. So in this time of crisis, we want to show that our overseas labor office cares," Philippine Assistant Labor Attache to Kuwait Cathy Duladul told Kuwait Times on Sunday.

"From the time we launched the program in the second week of April, we've received 10,122 applications. We need proof that you've lost your job and have no work and no pay. In the absence of such documents, they can submit a personal undertaking bearing the name of the applicant, name of the company and the date from which they haven't received their salaries. We ask them to sign the application form and send the documents back to us. We also need copies of their passport or any Philippine government identification card and send it by email," Duladul said.

According to Duladul, approved applicants will be notified through email and cash can be collected from various money remittance centers in Kuwait. "We have accredited at least four money remittance companies to hand the cash assistance, which will be mentioned in the email," she said. She called upon Filipinos to follow the guidelines being implemented in Kuwait, especially with regards to COVID-19, and abide by the rules and regulations of the country.

Food relief drive

Meanwhile, parallel to the cash assistance program of the Philippine government, the embassy also launched a food relief drive for Filipinos in Kuwait. "The grocery packages comprise of rice, noodles and canned food. Sometimes we include milk, oil and diapers for babies. These are all basic needs of Filipinos," said Embassy Welfare Officer Llewelyn Perez, who said the food drive has been going on for two weeks now.

When asked if the food drive is also funded by the Philippine government, he said: "Most of the money is from the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, but also donated by companies and individuals. This relief program is separate from the Department of Labor and Employment's efforts. We have a separate fund for this program to help and give food to Filipinos who are in need. Even if avail the cash assistance, you can also avail the food packs. So far we have distributed 7,000 grocery baskets, and we will be doing this until the condition normalizes," Perez said.

The embassy has tapped the assistance of all Filipino organizations in Kuwait to deliver the food relief packages to Filipinos in Kuwait. "We are doing it per governorate - house to house or building by building," she noted.

"We know the necessity of the project because we have many Filipinos in Kuwait who have no work and no pay during this pandemic. All they need to do is contact our coordinators and request for assistance on our website and Facebook accounts of volunteers in each area in Kuwait. Just inform us that you need the grocery packages and we will deliver it to you at your doorsteps through our volunteers," she said.

The embassy thanked some NGOs for pioneering the food drive and showing their support to fellow Filipinos during the pandemic, like Pinoy Arabia ME, Sandigan, IWOK, AKO-OFW, ASFOK and others from the Alliance of Filipino Organizations in Kuwait. "They've been very organized and we laud them for their efforts. We can do it alone, but we involved Filipino organizations for easy mobilization and quick delivery of goods to the most needy within the community," Perez concluded.



7,000 grocery baskets distributed



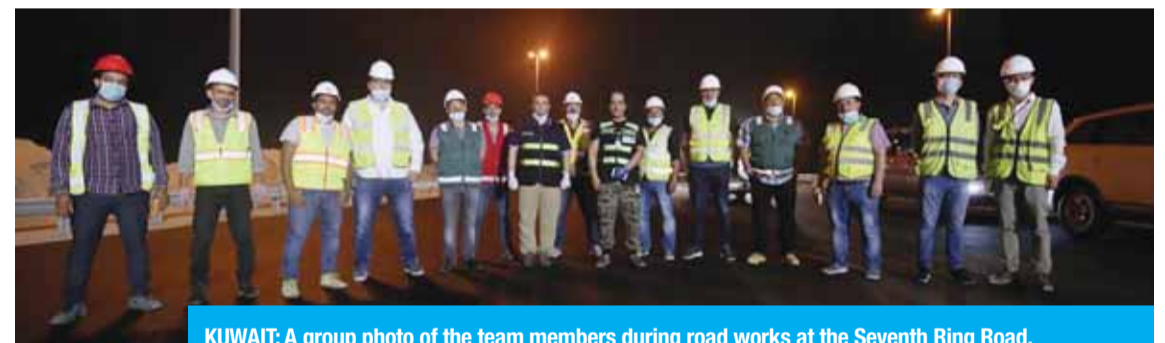
KUWAIT: Workers prepare grocery packages as part of a food relief drive launched by the Philippines embassy for Filipinos in Kuwait. —Photos by Ben Garcia

Road projects ongoing during curfew hours

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The ministry of public works is continuing to execute road projects, especially during the partial curfew hours, to finish more work as

the roads are almost empty. Kuwait Times went on a tour of some roads under construction on Saturday night. At the Seventh Ring Road, workers were applying a layer of asphalt. Jarrah Al-Harbi, director of engineers developing the Seventh Ring Road project, said the team was working on laying 1,300 tons of asphalt over an area of three kilometers, comprising of three lanes. "We work from 2:00 pm till 8:00 pm daily on this project that includes construction works and services, in addition to asphalt works. We work different timings including the day and night," he told Kuwait Times.



KUWAIT: A group photo of the team members during road works at the Seventh Ring Road. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Curfew shopping allowed in 36 co-ops

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry added more areas to the website that enables citizens and residents to book appointments to shop at co-operative societies in their respective areas of residence. Now people can book the date and time to shop at co-ops during curfew hours. There is a total of 36 areas available: Al-Faiha, Hadiya, Ishbiliya, Rawda, Al-Zahra, Al-Naeem, Mishref, Hateen, Kaifan, Bayan (block 2), Salmiya, Abu Fatira, Ahmadi, Fahaeel, Riqa (block 4), Dhaher, Fahad Al-Ahmad, Al-Naseem, Mansouriya, Sharq, Daeya, Shaab, Adailiya, Qurtuba, Abdullah Al-Salem, Jabriya (block 2), Nuzha, Ghemada, Shuhada, Salwa, Rabia, Jaber Al-Ali, Al-Ardiya, A-Khalida, Fintas, and Farwaniya.

To register, log on to www.moci.shop and follow the following instructions:

- 1- Select the preferred language.
- 2- Enter your civil ID number.
- 3- Enter your civil ID serial number.
- 4- Enter your name.
- 5- Enter your district.
- 6- Enter your cell phone number.
- 7- Enter your e-mail address.
- 8- Choose the market.

Customers must note that the allowed shopping time will be only for 30 minutes. Two barcodes will be sent to the shopper's email. One allows them to drive during the curfew hours, and the other to confirm the co-op appointment.

Ramadan moonsighting Wednesday

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Justice announced Sunday that the Ramadan moonsighting committee will meet tomorrow, Shaaban 29th for the year 1441 AH, in order to sight the holy month's crescent of Ramadan. In a statement, the ministry said that the meeting will be held at the headquarters of the Supreme Judicial Council headed by the head of the Supreme Judicial Council and the head of the Cassation and Constitutional Courts, Counselor Yusef Al-Mutawa, and in the presence of the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, Counselor Dr Fahad Al-Afasi. The Ministry called on citizens, residents and those who manage to watch the Ramadan's crescent to contact the authority at the following number (25376934).

Group helped to embassy

KUWAIT: The Interior Ministry released a statement commented on a video clip that circulated on social media showing several expatriates entering Adailiya on foot. It said that policemen went to the area and took the group to the police station. The men said they were heading to the Indian embassy to obtain travel documents to take advantage of the amnesty and leave without having to pay fines. They ended up in Adailiya instead of Daeya where the embassy is located, the ministry said, adding that they were escorted to the embassy later.

In my view

Will be missed



By Abdellatif Sharaa

local@kuwaittimes.com

The holy month of Ramadan is almost here, and it is a long-awaited guest that is held dear by many Muslims, who receive it with joy and special traditions, though they vary from one Muslim country to another. Kuwait has customs that go back many decades, as people here prepare for it weeks before its arrival. You can see shoppers going around stores to buy fancy kitchenware to all that is necessary to cook.

Ramadan calls upon Muslims to refrain from eating, drinking and sexual relations, besides other things from dawn to dusk. People used to gather in Kuwait City just before sunset, where the iftar cannon is located, then break their fast after it was fired by eating dates and drinking laban (yogurt drink). Then once home, they eat a light meal waiting for the ghabqa, which is a full meal normally eaten after Isha prayers, during which traditional dishes such as jereesh, hares and luqaimat are served. As for women, they gather for a potluck and eat together.

Kuwait is well-known for its diwanias, where men gather on different social occasions, and many times they turn into mini parliaments where common issues are discussed. Many men have a tradition to play games such as cards and dama (checkers) just to have fun and pass time. One thing Kuwaitis are keen on is to send meals to laborers and the needy who gather in mosques to get their iftar meal every day of Ramadan, and I wonder how it will be this time, because iftar time will be well after the curfew starts.

Another tradition in Kuwait is when the night of the 13th of Ramadan arrives, children celebrate it with girgian, where they carry specially-sewn bags in their traditional costumes and go door to door singing special songs to receive candy, gifts and sometimes money.

A tradition that is found in many countries but has a special flavor in Kuwait is the "Abu Tubaila" or musaharati, where a man roams the streets and neighborhoods beating his traditional tabla (Arabic drum) to wake people to eat their suhoor meal before dawn, when they must stop eating and drinking.

There are many other acts done during the holy month, yet the coronavirus decided to put them all on hold, though I am sure it will be over soon and things will go back to normal, as long as we keep fighting it by staying home and social distance.

Ramadan Mubarak to all my friends, and see you soon!

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Local

Bader Al-Kharafi: Zain changes network name to 'Shlonik'

In line with launch of new MoH app and start of citizen evacuation plan

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced changing its network's name to 'Shlonik' in line with the Ministry of Health and the country's efforts to launch the 'Shlonik' app, which coincides with the inauguration of the government's plan to evacuate citizens stranded abroad. 'Shlonik' translates to 'how are you' in the Kuwaiti dialect.

'Shlonik' app was developed by Zain's team in joint collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Central Agency for Information Technology (CAIT). Zain's development of the app comes as an initiative on the company's part to support the country's efforts in fighting the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Zain recently changed its network's name to STAY HOME in line with the directives of the Council of Ministers to remind its customers to commit to staying at home as much as possible and contribute to ending this pandemic together.

Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi said: "changing the name of Zain's network to 'Shlonik' came to coincide with the launch of the app that holds the same name. This also comes in line with the start of the government's evacuation plan to bring back citizens who are stranded abroad, where we contribute to support these efforts and take part in comprehensive awareness campaigns conducted by the country's various institutions".

Kharafi continued: "the exceptional circumstances our country is going through because of the coronavirus outbreak forced everyone to take their part and unify their efforts to face this pandemic. On its part, Zain was keen on being a major part of these national efforts by making its tech capabilities available to contribute in enforcing the health and safety precautionary measures instructed by MoH and other entities".

Kharafi explained that 'Shlonik' app was developed by Zain's team in collaboration with CAIT and under the supervision and direction of MoH's teams. The app was designed as per the latest and most advanced standards.

Kharafi further added that the new app mainly aims at utilizing the latest tech solutions to monitor the commitment of citizens who recently returned to Kuwait as part of the government's evacuation plan in home quarantine instructions. The app is also an essential tool to pair with the smart wrist bracelet being distributed at Kuwait International Airport to anyone taking part in home quarantine".

Kharafi noted that changing the name of Zain's network to 'Shlonik' came to remind customers of the importance of downloading the app on their smartphones and contribute to minimizing contact as much as possible, as well as making sure that everyone is committing to home quarantine instructions and MoH's directives. This goes for people who are under home quarantine, family members residing with them at home, or members of the community.

Kharafi concluded: "we hope that these unified efforts between the private and

public sectors help in raising awareness in how dangerous it is not to follow the instructions of health authorities, as well as contribute to invite everyone to abide by precautionary directives and control the spread of this disease."

'Shlonik' can be downloaded on devices that support iOS and Android operating systems, and is available in five different languages: Arabic, English, Urdu, Tagalog, and Bengali. Users can sign up via their phone and civil ID numbers. The app features an interactive COVID-19 assessment agent to help each user know what to do next.

When home quarantined individuals first arrive home from Kuwait International Airport, they are required to complete the first check-in process via the app to notify MoH's team of their arrival and the commencement of their home quarantine period. They then enter their home quarantine location on the map, record a voice note,

and take a picture of themselves that clearly shows their face. The app will use this data to verify their identity during future check-ups using Artificial Intelligence (AI).

'Shlonik' is the main communication method between home quarantined individuals and the Ministry of Health's team responsible for monitoring their commitment to home quarantine instructions. The team will reach out to the user at least two times daily, and request some vitals like their body temperature and overall health. The app also allows audio and visual communication if needed.

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 also 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.

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.



Supporting efforts against COVID-19

How to renew visas during lockdown

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Due to the present situation and the closure of public institutions, the ministry of interior has provided more e-services on its official website www.moi.gov.kw to allow residents to renew their visas. Recently, the ministry extended the validity of all visas that expired from March 1 onwards till May 31, 2020. This includes all kinds of visit visas and all types of residency visas.

Apart of this temporary renewal, and after May 31, expats can renew their visas as following:

For holders of article 18 visas (expat employees working in the private sector): The employer should renew the visas of its employees after registering the company at the Public Authority for Manpower (PAM) and receiving a special code to complete the procedure of visa renewal online. The mandoub should personally visit PAM to receive the code. The applicant (representative of the company who has the code) should then apply for the medical insurance of each employee online through the official website of the ministry of health www.moh.gov.kw after paying the fees.

Then the applicant should visit www.moi.gov.kw and register the company to receive a code with a username and password that will be used for all applications. The applicant then clicks on General Department for Residency's renew residency tab and enters the ID and password to complete the visa re-

newal process.

For holders of article 20 visas (domestic helpers): The sponsor (kafeel) should apply for the medical insurance of the domestic worker on his sponsorship online through the official website of the ministry of health www.moh.gov.kw after paying the fees. The sponsor should then register an account on www.moi.gov.kw to receive a username and password. He then clicks on General Department for Residency's renew residency tab and enters the ID and password to complete the visa renewal process of his workers.

For holders of article 22 visas (family dependents): The sponsor (husband, father, mother, son, daughter and others) should apply for the medical insurance of the family member on their sponsorship online through the official website of the ministry of health www.moh.gov.kw after paying the fees. The sponsor should then register an account on www.moi.gov.kw to receive a username and password. They then click on the General Department for Residency's renew residency tab and enter the ID and password to complete the visa renewal of the dependent.

For holders of article 24 visas (self-sponsors): It's the same procedure as visa 20 and visa 22, where the applicant does the medical insurance for himself and renews the visa for himself as well.

Other visa types have not been added yet to the e-service on www.moi.gov.kw, but the three-month visa extension is available for them.

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COVID-19: Pakistan repatriates stranded UAE-based nationals

Japan's virus cases surge over 10,000; hospitals stretched

Page 8

Page 8



ELMSDALE, Canada: A member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) forensic identification unit photographs the body of a deceased man after a deadly shooting rampage, at the Big Stop near Elmsdale, Nova Scotia, Canada. —AFP

Gunman in mock-up police car kills 16

Canada's worst-ever shooting rampage

MONTREAL: A gunman who drove a mock-up police car killed at least 16 people in an Atlantic Canada shooting rampage, federal police said Sunday, the worst case of its kind in Canadian history. The shooter, identified as Gabriel Wortman, 51, was shot dead by officers after a 12-hour manhunt in Nova Scotia province ended Sunday morning. Among the victims was a veteran female constable with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which also handles municipal and provincial law enforcement in the province.

Police said the suspect had been on the run since Saturday night, when officers were alerted to shots fired in the town of Portapique, around 100 kilometers from Halifax. Gun violence in Canada is far less frequent than in the neighboring United States, and weapons more strictly controlled, but the killings were the country's worst ever, exceeding the toll in 1989 when a gunman murdered 14 female students at Montreal's Ecole Polytechnique.

Public broadcaster CBC quoted RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki as saying police know of at least 16 victims, besides the shooter. "What has unfolded overnight and into this morning is incomprehensible and many families are experiencing the loss of a loved one," Nova Scotia RCMP Commanding Officer, Assistant Commissioner Lee Bergerman, wrote on the force's local Facebook page.

"That includes our own RCMP family. It is with tremendous sadness that I share with you that we lost Constable Heidi Stevenson, a 23-year veteran of the Force who was killed this morning, while responding to an active shooter incident." In addition to Stevenson, a mother of two, a male officer was injured and is in hos-

pital with non-life threatening injuries, Bergerman said. The National Post newspaper said another victim was an elementary school teacher, citing a Facebook post from the woman's sister.

Several victims were discovered both outside and inside a house in Portapique, sparking the manhunt through multiple communities, police said. "The search for the suspect ended this morning when the suspect was located. And I can confirm that he is deceased," RCMP Chief Superintendent Chris Leather told a



Shooter killed after a 12-hour manhunt

press conference. Leather said that at one point, the suspect appeared to be wearing part of a police uniform and was driving a vehicle made to look like an RCMP cruiser.

Fires burned

RCMP tweeted several times that he was not an officer and warned he was considered "armed and dangerous." "The initial search for the suspect led to

multiple sites in the area, including structures that were on fire," Leather told the news conference.

Another police spokesperson said, without further details, that the gunman was killed after an officer intervened.

An independent agency, the Serious Incident Response Team (SiRT), which probes certain incidents involving the province's police, said that it "is investigating the shooting of a male in Enfield by RCMP officers." SiRT said in a statement that a confrontation had occurred in Enfield, which is near the Halifax airport, "resulting in officers discharging their firearms. The suspect was found to be deceased at the scene."

Police said they had no indication of a motive. Lucki told CBC there was no indication "at this point" of a terrorist intent. "What I would say is that it appears to be at least in part, very random in nature," said Leather.

"We are in the early stages of an incredibly detailed and complex investigation that has forever changed countless lives," he said. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement that he "was saddened to learn about the senseless violence in Nova Scotia," and he hopes for a full recovery of the wounded.

The National Post quoted Tom Taggart, a councillor who represents Portapique in the Municipality of Colchester, as saying the community was devastated. He described the community as a "subdivision in the woods where people have acre lots along the shore," and where Wortman owned three properties. "It's absolutely unbelievable this could happen in our community. I never dreamt this would happen here," Taggart said.—AFP

Turkey blocks Saudi, UAE news websites

ISTANBUL: Turkish authorities blocked Saudi and United Arab Emirates news websites on Sunday, days after the sites of Turkey's state broadcaster and news agency were blocked in Saudi Arabia. The apparently reciprocal moves come four weeks after Turkish prosecutors indicted 20 Saudis over the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, a killing that soured relations between Ankara and Riyadh.

Internet users in Turkey trying to access the sites of Saudi news agency SPA, the UAE's WAM news agency and more than a dozen other sites saw a message saying that they were blocked under a law governing internet publications in Turkey. A spokesman at Turkey's Justice Ministry declined to comment on the actions and Saudi Arabia's government media office did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

The Turkish website of the UK-based Independent newspaper, which is operated by a Saudi company, was one of the sites to be blocked on Sunday, in a move that its editor said reflected political tensions between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. "We believe the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Turkey reflected on us," editor Nevzat Cicek told Reuters. Sunday's decision appeared to be "retaliation against Saudi Arabia", he said.

Saudi Arabia had blocked access to several Turkish news websites a week earlier, including state broadcaster TRT and the state-owned Anadolu agency. Residents in the United Arab Emirates, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, said the Turkish websites were accessible on Sunday. Tensions between Turkey and Saudi Arabia escalated sharply after Saudi agents killed Khashoggi, a critic of Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018.

Last month Istanbul prosecutors indicted one of the prince's close aides and a former deputy head of Saudi general intelligence on charges of instigating Khashoggi's killing, as well as 18 men it said carried out the operation. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said the killing was ordered at the "highest levels" of the Saudi government. Prince Mohammed has denied ordering the killing but said he bore ultimate responsibility as the kingdom's de facto leader.—Reuters

With virus 'under control', Germany begins opening up

BERLIN: Germany takes its first steps back towards normality yesterday, with smaller shops in some regions opening up for the first time in a month after politicians declared the coronavirus "under control". From florists to fashion stores, the majority of shops smaller than 800 square meters (8,600 square feet) will be allowed to welcome customers again, in a first wave of relaxations to strict curbs on public life introduced last month. Chancellor Angela Merkel and regional state premiers announced the decision to reopen last week, though they have been careful to cast it as no more than a cautious first step. While the first shops will open their doors yesterday, each of Germany's 16 states is set to lift the restrictions at a slightly different pace. In some states such as the capital Berlin, reopening will take a little longer. Merkel, who has been praised for her handling of the coronavirus crisis, is hoping to reinvent the ailing German economy, which officially entered into recession last week.

'Fragile'

With 139,897 confirmed cases and 4,294 deaths

as of Sunday, Germany has been one of the countries worst hit by COVID-19, but also one of the quickest to react. On Friday, the Robert Koch Institute for public health announced that the rate of infection - the number of people each ill person contaminates - had dropped below one for the first time, leading Health Minister Jens Spahn to declare the virus "under control". Yet Merkel, who was herself quarantined for two weeks earlier this month before testing negative for the virus, has warned that Germany's success remains "fragile".

"We will not be able to go back to our normal lives for a long time," said her conservative party colleague Armin Laschet, the state premier of North-Rhine Westphalia, the country's most populous region. In an interview with Der Spiegel weekly, Laschet warned that some coronavirus restrictions could last until 2021. A ban on gatherings of more than two people and a requirement to stand more than 1.5 meters apart from others in public areas remain in force. That means that hairdressers, initially deemed an essential business, cannot open until at least May 4.

Cultural venues, bars, leisure centres and beauty salons will also remain closed for the time being, while large-scale public events such as concerts and football matches have been banned until August 31. But Germans can look forward to at least some relaxations to the existing shutdown although they have not been welcomed by everyone. With larger



BERLIN: People gather in Volkspark Wilmersdorf Park in Berlin amid the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. —AFP

shops unable to open, the German Trade Association warned Friday of a possible "distortion of competition". Yet Economy Minister Peter Altmaier defended the 800-square-metre limit, saying that "the belt can only be loosened bit by bit".

Schools reopening

Schools will also be partially reopened in the coming weeks, with most states set to welcome back older students from May 4. Education policy is traditionally decided at state level in Germany, and Bavaria, the region worst hit by the virus so far, will keep its schools closed for an extra week.—AFP

Iran says US giving 'Hollywood' account of Gulf encounter

TEHRAN: Iran's Revolutionary Guards on Sunday said the US gave a "Hollywood" account of an encounter between the two states' navies in the Gulf, after Washington said Tehran's vessels had

harassed its ships. The US Department of Defense had accused Tehran of dangerous and provocative actions on Wednesday, saying 11 of the Guards' vessels "repeatedly crossed the bows and sterns of the US vessels at extremely close range and high speeds".

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) said in a statement on its official website that the US Navy "has presented an incorrect and agenda-fuelled narrative of this encounter, which shows the Americans' interest in Hollywood stories". It accused the US of

"blocking the path" of Iranian ship Shahid Siavoshi on April 6 and 7 with "dangerous behavior while ignoring warnings".

The IRGC in response increased maritime patrols, the statement said, and encountered American warships on April 15. The 11 patrol boats "forced them to draw back from the path of Sepah (IRGC) vessels, despite the provocative and unprofessional actions" of US ships, which ignored warnings. According to a US Navy statement, Navy and Coast Guard ships were conducting operations in international waters in the northern

Gulf with Apache attack helicopters.

"We advise Americans to follow international regulations and maritime protocols in the Arabian Gulf and Sea of Oman and avoid any adventurism and false stories," the IRGC said. It warned that any "miscalculation will receive a decisive response". Tensions have risen between the two arch foes since the US withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions on Iran in 2018. They escalated when Washington killed IRGC top commander Major General Qasem Soleimani in a drone strike in January. —AFP

International

Death sparks unrest at a migrant camp in Greece

Fire rips through one of Greece's largest migrant camps

ATHENS: A fire ripped through one of Greece's largest migrant camps leaving widespread damage and many people homeless after the death of an Iraqi woman sparked unrest, officials said yesterday. The blaze late Saturday at Vial camp on Chios island destroyed the facilities of the European asylum service, a camp canteen, warehouse tents and many housing containers, Migration Ministry Secretary Manos Logothetis told AFP. "A large part of the camp's administrative services was destroyed," said Logothetis, adding that no injuries were reported.

The UN refugee agency's spokesman in Athens, Boris Cheshirkov, said the damage is still being evaluated but that many camp residents have likely been left homeless. "Authorities are still assessing the damages but a few hundred people are likely affected because their shelters have burned down. We have donated tents to the authorities which can quickly be put into use and we will assist in replacing the warehouse tents," he told AFP.

Anissa, a 22-year-old asylum-seeker from Somalia who declined to give her last name out of concern for her safety, said the fire "burned two big tents and each tent has more than 20 homes" inside. Aziza Hussein, a 30-year-old mother of two from Afghanistan, said a group of camp residents "attacked the food warehouses, set fire to the info point, took the food refrigerators into the camp and

set them on fire." "We are not safe at all, we are very scared... We can't sleep at night," she said. Both women said police fired tear gas to disperse the protesters.

Camps under quarantine

At least three vehicles outside the camp were also gutted. A police source in Athens said two Afghans and an Iraqi had been arrested in relation to the unrest, which erupted after a 47-year-old asylum seeker from Iraq died in the camp on Saturday.

"We managed to restore order at around 1 am... There were many people who took part in the incidents," another police source on Chios said. The Iraqi woman who died had been taken with a fever to a hospital earlier this week. At the time, a test for coronavirus had returned negative, state news agency ANA reported Saturday.

Migrant camps in Greece have been under quarantine in recent weeks, with authorities trying to keep residents apart from locals. The virus has so far killed 110 people in Greece. Another 67 are in intensive care. No coronavirus cases have been reported in island camps so far, but two camps on the mainland have registered cases. As with all of Greece's island camps, Vial is massively overcrowded with more than 5,000 people living in space intended for around 1,000.

Some 100,000 asylum seekers are currently



Many people rendered homeless

In Germany, Syrians take their torturers to court

BERLIN: When Anwar Al-Bunni crossed paths with fellow Syrian Anwar Raslan in a DIY store in Germany five years ago, he recognised him as the man who had thrown him in jail a decade earlier. On Thursday, the two men will face each other in a German court, where Raslan will be one of two alleged former Syrian intelligence officers in the dock accused of crimes against humanity for Bashar al-Assad's regime.

In the first legal proceedings worldwide over state-sponsored torture in Syria, Raslan will be tried under the principle of universal jurisdiction—which allows a foreign country to prosecute crimes against humanity. For Bunni, speaking to AFP in Berlin, the trial will send "an important message" to the Assad regime: "You will never have impunity, so think about it!"

'I knew this man' -

Germany has taken in more than a million asylum seekers—many fleeing war in Syria and Iraq—and as a result sometimes become a surreal arena where vic-

tims run into their erstwhile torturers in the street. Raslan, a former colonel, arrived in Germany as a refugee himself in July 2014, having deserted the Syrian army two years earlier.

Bunni said Raslan was the man who arrested him at his Damascus home in May 2006 and threw him in a state prison, where the lawyer spent five years until he was freed during the Syrian uprising in 2011. The two men arrived in Berlin within two months of each other, and crossed paths when they were briefly staying in the same centre for asylum seekers. "I told myself that I knew this man, but I didn't recognize him instantly," Bunni told AFP, drawing on an e-cigarette. A few months later, he came face to face with his alleged captor once again—this time in a store—and finally recognized him.

'Not about revenge'

A Syrian lawyer in his sixties, Bunni was an indefatigable advocate for human rights in his home country, but has lived as a refugee in Berlin. Unable to pursue his profession in Germany, he now collects evidence and testimonies against the regime. While Bunni will not be one of the plaintiffs in Thursday's trial, he is a respected figure in Germany's 700,000 strong Syrian community, and has convinced numerous victims to come forward.

In 2016, when he started working together with local lawyers, Bunni learned that German investigators already had their eye on Raslan, who was arrest-

ed in February 2019. Raslan now stands accused of having overseen the murder of 58 people and the torture of 4,000 others while in charge of the Al-Khatib detention centre in Damascus between 2011 and 2012. Another Syrian, 43-year-old Eyad Al-Gharib, is accused of having been an accomplice. "This is not about revenge, it is about exposing the truth," German lawyer Patrick Kroker said. He represents six Syrian plaintiffs, who may yet be joined by a further two women. Now refugees in various European countries, these victims of torture by the Damascus regime "want the world to learn about what happened there," said Kroker. —AFP



CHIOS: A Somali woman sits outside her tent in the Vial camp on the island of Chios which has only 1,000 places, but houses nearly 5,000 asylum seekers in unsanitary conditions. —AFP

stranded in Greece after other European states closed their borders in 2016. Overall, more than 36,000 people are sheltering in the camps on islands near Turkey that were originally built for 6,100. The migration ministry has said it will begin

moving hundreds of elderly and ailing asylum seekers out of the island camps to protect them from the coronavirus. A scheme to gradually relocate 1,600 unaccompanied minors from war-torn countries to other European nations also began this week. —AFP



BERLIN: Syrian human rights lawyer Anwar Al-Bunni speaks to an AFP reporter in his office in Berlin. —AFP

ed in February 2019. Raslan now stands accused of having overseen the murder of 58 people and the torture of 4,000 others while in charge of the Al-Khatib detention centre in Damascus between 2011 and 2012.

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MASERU: Lesotho Defense Force are seen stationed in a street in Maseru. —AFP

party rivals, whom he accused of plotting to topple his government. Although no case of coronavirus has yet been reported in the mountain kingdom, citizens were last week placed under confinement until at least today to stem any spread of the disease. Thabane's order took a step further, deploying the army against unnamed "rogue" national elements he said wanted to destabilize Lesotho. —AFP

National Assembly. Voting took place in the capital as well as the troubled central town of Mopti and Gao in the north, according to residents.

Delays

It was the country's first parliamentary poll since 2013 when President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's Rally for Mali party won a big majority. Turnout in the first round averaged over 35 percent nationwide but was less than 13 percent in the capital Bamako. On Sunday's second-round vote, turnout was 23.2 percent, according to Synergie, which had dispatched election observers.

The election had been meant to take place in late 2018 after Keita was returned to office but was postponed several times, mainly because of security concerns. A "national dialogue" staged last year to discuss Mali's spiral of violence called for the ballot to be completed by May. The hope is that the new MPs will endorse changes to the constitution that will promote decentralization. That is the key to pushing ahead with the government's plans for peace. It signed a deal with armed separatists in northern Mali in 2015 but the pact has largely stalled. —AFP

Calls mount for PM to resign as Lesotho soldiers withdraw

MASERU: Lesotho troops deployed by Prime Minister Thomas Thabane amid a showdown with opponents demanding the octogenarian leader resign withdrew from the capital's streets on Sunday. Thabane faces mounting calls to step down from rivals within his ruling party and opposition groups over suspicions he had a hand in the murder of his estranged wife in 2017.

An AFP journalist in the capital Maseru reported that soldiers backed by armored vehicles had returned to barracks by Sunday morning. Thabane had deployed them the day before to "restore order" while accusing unnamed law enforcement agencies of undermining democracy. The army spokesman was not immediately available for comment. Diplomatic moves to calm the situation were meanwhile gathering pace.

A South African envoy has arrived in Lesotho, Thabane's senior private secretary Thabo Thakalekoala

Mali poll marred by intimidation

BAMAKO: Acts of intimidation and allegations of vote buying marred the final round of legislative elections in Mali on Sunday aimed at reviving confidence in embattled institutions despite a bloody jihadist conflict and a virus pandemic. In central Mali, the president of a voting station was forcibly removed and representatives of the electoral commission "chased away by armed men", one of the representatives said. Military sources confirmed the incident.

Elsewhere, voting was cancelled after jihadists threatened to attack voters, witnesses said. Already on Saturday, unknown assailants had destroyed voting equipment in northern Mali. And on Sunday, observer umbrella group Synergie said there had been many incidents of vote buying at several voting stations. The first provisional results are to be announced at the start of the week. The election had been repeatedly delayed, and the first round on March 29 was disrupt-

ed by jihadist attacks as well as the kidnapping of opposition leader Soumaila Cisse.

'Consolidate our democracy'

"I voted. It is important despite the economic situation. We need new MPs to consolidate our democracy," Moussa Diakite, a 23-year-old student said. Another student, Hamchetou Toure, said she wore a face mask and observed social distancing rules as she voted in the semi-desert country, which has so far recorded 216 cases of the virus including 13 deaths. Among the measures taken by the government are a night-time curfew, school closures and restrictions on some activities - but people still filled markets, mosques and public transport.

The Synergie said anti-virus protection kits had been distributed to over 96 percent of polling stations that it visited across the former French colony. It said poll workers wore masks in over 87 percent of the stations visited. Mali, one of the world's poorest countries, is struggling with an Islamist revolt that has claimed thousands of lives and forced hundreds of thousands from their homes. Sunday's runoff in the West African nation of 19 million people is for 147 seats in the

Death of 44 jihadists shrouded in mystery

N'DJAMENA: The deaths by apparent poisoning of 44 suspected Boko Haram jihadists in a Chad prison were shrouded in mystery on Sunday, with observers wondering whether they were murdered or had committed collective suicide. The semi-desert country's chief prosecutor Youssouf Tom said late Saturday that the prisoners were found dead in their cells in the N'Djamena jail on Thursday.

An autopsy carried out on four of the dead prisoners revealed traces of a lethal substance that had caused heart attacks or severe asphyxiation, he said. Officials said the 44 were among a group of 58 suspects captured during a major army operation around Lake Chad launched by President Idriss Deby Itno early this month.

They were to have been tried by a criminal court, Justice Minister Djimet Arabi told AFP. "What happened in the meantime? We are still in shock," Arabi said, adding that an investigation has been launched. Before Tom's announcement, a security source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP that the prisoners had been held in "a single cell and were given nothing to eat or drink for two days". But the justice minister insisted "there was no mistreatment and the prisoners were fine the day before".

Opposition and civil society groups demanded answers on Sunday. "It's a serious violation of international humanitarian law," said Jean Bosco Manga, founder of the Citizens' Movement for the Preservation of Liberties. "When the enemy is under your control, disarmed, he must enjoy all humanitarian protections," Mahamat Alabo, a leading opposition figure, said. "The Chadian government is responsible for what happened to them in prison. The causes must really be determined," he said, calling for an independent investigation.

The government says the 14 prisoners who survived would be questioned over the circumstances of the deaths. An expert on Boko Haram at London University, Bulama Bukarti, told AFP the prisoners may have swallowed poison to avoid the humiliation of a trial or to avoid divulging strategic information. But he said no such group suicide has occurred in the past. Bukarti speculated however that they may have followed the example of Islamic State group leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who blew himself up when a US raid chased him into a dead-end tunnel in his Syrian hideout last October.

Vengeance?

Another possibility is that Chadian security forces poisoned the prisoners, Bukarti said, perhaps to avenge the deaths of 98 soldiers in a March 23 attack on a base at Bohoma, in the Lake Chad marshlands. It was the largest one-day loss the vaunted Chadian army has ever suffered, and it prompted the massive military operation against Boko Haram.

Bukarti noted that humanitarian groups had reported "thousands" of killings of suspected Boko Haram members by the region's armies without due process. "The third possible scenario is that Chad never captured those Boko Haram fighters in the first place. It could be that Chad exaggerated the figure of the fighters it arrested just as many see the 1,000 they said they killed as inflated," Bukarti said. "The only way to save face in this case would be to concoct a story like this," he said. —AFP

International

Europe plans slow reopening; NY passes peak in virus battle

Governments now debating how and when to ease lockdowns

NEW YORK: Hard-hit European nations began preparing for a slow reopening and the US epicenter New York reported headway Sunday in their battle against the deadly pandemic. Governments across the world are now debating how and when to ease lockdowns that have kept more than half of humanity - 4.5 billion people-confined to their homes and crippled the global economy.

Europe saw encouraging signs Sunday, with Italy, Spain, France and Britain showing drops in daily death tolls and slowing infection rates. The continent accounts for almost two-thirds of the nearly 165,000 fatalities reported across the globe out of more than 2.3 million declared infections, according to an AFP tally. In the United States-the country with the highest number of deaths and infections-New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said the outbreak was "on the descent," though he cautioned that it was "no time to get cocky."

Mounting evidence suggests that the lockdowns and social distancing are slowing the spread of the virus. That has intensified planning in many countries to begin loosening curbs on movement and easing the crushing pressure on national economies. Hard-hit Spain has extended a nationwide shutdown but said it would ease restrictions to allow children time outside. Switzerland, Denmark and Finland all began reopening shops and schools.

Germany will allow some shops to reopen Monday after declaring the virus "under control," while Italy-once the hardest-hit European country-mulled easing restrictions. Iran, which has the Middle East's deadliest outbreak, allowed some "low-risk" businesses to reopen Saturday. The tentatively hopeful signs come with the United States and China squabbling over suggestions by President Donald Trump that a labo-

ratory in the ground zero city of Wuhan may have spawned the pandemic. The lab rejected such theories as "impossible."

Ice-rink morgue closing

Spain registered 410 new fatalities on Sunday, the lowest daily count in almost a month, and a figure that health ministry emergencies coordinator Fernando Simon said "gives us hope." The authorities are even starting to shut some makeshift facilities set up to relieve the overburdened health system, including a morgue at a Madrid ice rink. France said a nationwide lockdown in force for a month was beginning to bear fruit, with death tolls and hospitalizations declining.

"We are scoring points against the epidemic," said Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, while insisting "we are not out of the health crisis yet." In

Britain, the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson-himself recovering from the virus-faced fresh criticism over his early response to the crisis and shortages of protective equipment.

'Past the high point'

The United States has the highest caseload of any country, with more than

759,000 confirmed infections and nearly 41,000 deaths. But in New York state, Governor Cuomo said, "We are past the high point, and all indications at this point is that we are on the descent." After days of bickering between Trump and several governors on the extent of federal help for the states, Cuomo adopted a tempered tone Sunday, saying the joint federal and state effort had been a "phenomenal accomplishment."

But he cautioned that without more federal help, cash-strapped states will suffer severely. "You'll see a cut to hospitals in the midst of this," he said. Americans and others around the world have been



DUBAI: Employees load the body of a COVID-19 victim into the furnace at the New Sonapur Hindu crematorium in the Gulf Emirate of Dubai. —AFP

chafing under stay-at-home orders, and some have taken to the streets to protest. New anti-lockdown demonstrations over the weekend drew hundreds of people in states including Colorado, Texas, Maryland, New Hampshire and Ohio. Many waved American flags, and some carried weapons. But others stayed in their cars or wore protective masks.

In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis allowed selected beaches to re-open for "essential activities." Although fog shrouded the area around the state's Jacksonville Beach, those who turned out were "keeping their distance" from each other, Captain Rich Banks of Neptune Beach Ocean Rescue said. Trump fueled another bout of fury over

the weekend by lending support to protests against the lockdown restrictions-which medical experts say save countless lives.

In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro-who has repeatedly claimed the virus threat is overblown-joined hundreds of protesters in Brasilia who objected to state governors' stay-home orders. Brazil has the most infections in Latin America, a region where an AFP tally on Sunday showed total cases had surpassed 100,000 with nearly 5,000 deaths. For many of the world's 260 million Orthodox Christians marking Easter, the celebration took place at home, with services online or on television. —AFP



Death toll mounts, economy crippled

COVID-19: Pakistan repatriates stranded UAE-based nationals

DUBAI: Pakistan has started repatriating some of its citizens from the United Arab Emirates, which had threatened to review labor ties with countries refusing to take back their nationals during the novel coronavirus pandemic. The first Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flight carrying 227 "stranded passengers" from Dubai and other emirates left for Islamabad on Saturday evening, Pakistan's consulate general in Dubai said in a Twitter post.

More flights would depart the UAE from Monday to April 28, Sayed Zulfiqar Bukhari, a special assistant to Pakistan's prime minister, said on Twitter. More than 40,000 Pakistanis in the Gulf Arab state have registered with the consulate to return home, two UAE newspapers reported. The UAE and other Gulf states have reported increased infections among low-income migrant workers who live in overcrowded quarters. Some have moved to re-house them in shuttered schools or dedicated centers, and are trying to arrange flights to repatriate them.

On Sunday, the UAE announced 479 new cases and four more deaths, bringing its total to 6,781

Japan's virus cases surge over 10,000; hospitals stretched

TOKYO: Japanese medics are warning more must be done to prevent the coronavirus from overwhelming the country's healthcare system as confirmed cases passed 10,000, despite a nationwide state of emergency. Experts have been alarmed by a recent spike in COVID-19 infections, with hundreds detected daily. Japan's outbreak remains less severe than in hard-hit

Life under lockdown in India's massive Dharavi slum

MUMBAI: In homes that are cramped, stuffy and increasingly low on food, residents of Mumbai's huge Dharavi slum are struggling under India's nationwide lockdown. In Dharavi, where an estimated one million people live, residents are stretching out meals and relying on donations. But anxiety has been building since the lockdown began on March 25.

"I used to feed my children when I went out for work, but now there is only sorrow and no work," said Najma Mohammad, who was employed at a garment shop that has closed. Her son and two daughters rely on food handouts from neighbors, she added. Dharavi, believed to be Asia's largest slum, is a tough place to be confined, and also one of the most vulnerable to the new coronavirus because of the density of its population and poor sanitation.

Hundreds of people sometimes share the same bath-

rooms. Access to clean water is not guaranteed. Soap has become a luxury. "Anything can happen. There are nine people in this room, all of us could be in danger," said migrant worker Namchand Mandal, who is from the northeastern state of Jharkhand. Dharavi has 138 reported cases so far, but experts fear that number will accelerate higher. "I am really worried it is just a matter of time," virologist Shahid Jameel said of Mumbai's slums, which are home to an estimated 65% of the city's core population of around 12 million.

Anxious residents have tied handkerchiefs or shirt sleeves around their faces in lieu of proper masks. Some have also barricaded alleyways using carts, bicycles and sticks. Signs warn outsiders to keep away. Still, many residents say it is impossible to stay confined in small rooms, which are sometimes shared by day laborers who work different shifts. Deep in the slums, people throng informal markets. Some adults kill time playing chess or watching videos on their cell phones. Children play cricket and cards.

One tailor opened his small shop early in the morning, saying he wanted to make a little money before police arrived later in the day to enforce the lockdown. Officers have punished lockdown violators by making them sit in the sun, do squats or by hitting

cases and 41 deaths. This year's Arabian Travel Market, a major regional tourism fair in Dubai that had already been rescheduled to June from April, was cancelled. The exhibition centre in which it was set to take place is being used as a hospital to treat patients with COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus.

The UAE said last week it would review labor relations with states refusing to evacuate citizens, including those who have lost jobs or been put on leave, after the ambassadors of India and Pakistan said their countries were not yet ready to do so. PIA said on its website that it would not be able to provide services for inbound flights beyond Islamabad International Airport because of the suspension of domestic flights and a lockdown in the country.

Millions of foreign workers, many from Asia, form the backbone of Gulf economies and work in sectors that have been disrupted by the coronavirus outbreak. The pandemic is also likely to disrupt the significant remittances those workers send back to their home countries. The total infection count in the six Gulf states has risen steadily to more than 26,600, with 167 deaths, despite containment measures such as halting passenger flights, curfews and in several cases locking down districts with large populations of low-income expatriate workers.

Saudi Arabia, which has the most infections and deaths among Gulf Cooperation Council states, at 9,362 and 97, recorded a record 1,088 new cases in

European countries, but its caseload is one of Asia's highest after China and India, and is roughly on par with South Korea.

There have been 171 deaths recorded so far in Japan and 10,751 cases, with the country under a month-long state of emergency, initially covering seven regions but now in place nationwide. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has urged residents to reduce contact with other people by 70 to 80 percent, and the number of people on Tokyo's normally packed transport system has dropped significantly.

But the measures do not prevent people from going out, and many shops and even restaurants remain open, even as medical associations warn the country's healthcare system is struggling to cope. "The system is



ISLAMABAD: Local residents wearing facemasks and practicing social distancing hold placards as they protest against quarantine facility center set up in their neighborhood during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Islamabad. —AFP

24 hours. It said 83% of the new confirmed cases were among non-Saudi nationals. Kuwait's 90-year-old ruler, Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, addressed the nation on Sunday to welcome back the first group of Kuwaitis returned home under a new repatriation program. He urged them to comply with all isolation and quarantine guidelines given by authorities in the Gulf state, which has recorded seven deaths, including one on Sunday, and almost 2,000 cases of the infection. —Reuters

on the verge of collapse in many places in Japan," said Kentaro Iwata, an infectious diseases specialist from Kobe University who has repeatedly criticized the government's response to the crisis.

Speaking at a press briefing yesterday, Iwata said Japan's strategy of limited testing and intensive contact-tracing worked well in the initial phase of the local outbreak, when numbers were small. But he charged that Japan failed to adapt as the outbreak grew. "We needed to prepare for once the situation changes, once the cluster-chasing became not effective and we needed to change strategy immediately," he said. "But traditionally speaking, and historically speaking, Japan is not very good at changing strategy," he added. —AFP



MUMBAI: Laborers carry fire wood at the Dharavi slum during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Mumbai. —AFP

them with sticks, according to a Reuters witness. "It's very difficult. No one listens to us," said one police officer in Dharavi, adding that some bank employees shared special passes with friends so they could move around. Mumbai police did not respond to a request for comment. —Reuters

News in brief

Brazilian drug lord expelled

MAPUTO: Mozambique on Sunday expelled one of Brazil's most wanted criminals, an alleged drug lord who has been on the run for two decades. Gilberto "Fuminho" Aparecido dos Santos was sent home on a Brazilian air force plane that left Maputo in the dead of night at 1:30 am with dozens of police officers on board, the authorities said. Brazil's justice ministry said Sunday that dos Santos is already in a federal prison in the country. Dos Santos was arrested last Monday in an international sting operation that included agents from Brazil, Mozambique and the US Drug Enforcement Administration. The Mozambican authorities decided on Friday to expel him for allegedly entering the country illegally but kept the decision secret until he had left. He is an alleged leader of the First Capital Command (PCC), considered to be Brazil's top criminal gang wielding control over cocaine supply routes from Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. —AFP

Thousands of Israelis protest

TEL AVIV: Thousands of Israelis demonstrated Sunday in Tel Aviv to warn against what they said was a threat to democracy from ongoing coalition talks between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former rival Benny Gantz. Some 2,000 protesters, according to media estimates, followed a call launched on Facebook by the "Black Flag" movement which condemns Netanyahu's continuing rule. Israel's parliament was tasked with forming a government on Thursday after speaker Gantz and Netanyahu missed a deadline to seal an alliance, but negotiations between the sides were ongoing. Israel's deeply divided 120-member parliament has no clear path towards a stable governing coalition, so the move risks prolonging the country's worst-ever political crisis. Gantz and Netanyahu could still agree on an emergency unity government to help Israel confront the COVID-19 pandemic, prospect the protesters spoke out against. —AFP

'Armed bandits' kill 47

BAUCHI: Gunmen killed 47 people in attacks on villages in the northwestern Nigerian state of Katsina in the early hours of Saturday, local police said. "Armed bandits", some of whom wielded AK 47 guns, carried out the attacks, Katsina police said in a statement on Sunday. Hundreds of people have been killed in the last year by criminal gangs carrying out robberies and kidnappings in northwest Nigeria. Such attacks have added to security challenges in Africa's most populous country, which is already struggling to contain Islamist insurgencies in the northeast and communal violence over grazing rights in central states. Gunmen, some with AK 47 guns, carried out the attacks in three local government authorities in the state in the early hours of Saturday between 12:30 am and around 3 am. Katsina police said in its statement. —Reuters

Refugee women face risk

GENEVA: Displaced women and girls are facing a heightened risk of gender-based violence during the coronavirus crisis, the UN Refugee Agency said yesterday. The UNHCR said they may be forced into "survival sex" or child marriages. Lockdowns imposed to control the spread of COVID-19 have restricted movement and led to the closure of services. "We need to pay urgent attention to the protection of refugee, displaced and stateless women and girls at the time of this pandemic," said Gillian Triggs, the UNHCR assistant high commissioner for protection. —AFP

Business

TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 2020

10 Japan to boost stimulus to \$1.1tn as virus threatens deeper recession



11 Oil price declines on expectations of extended demand slowdown



11 Italy firms shake lockdown using shortcut in virus law



TOKYO: Pedestrians walk past a quotation board displaying share prices of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo. — AFP

Oil prices collapse on storage fears

OPEC+ deal fails to balance edgy crude markets

HONG KONG: Oil prices collapsed to more than two-decade lows yesterday as traders grow concerned that storage facilities are reaching their limits, while signs that the coronavirus may have peaked in Europe and the United States were unable to help Asian equities extend their recent advances.

US crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate briefly plunged almost 20 percent to below \$14.50 — its lowest since 1999 — as stockpiles continue to build owing to a crash in demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysts said this month's agreement between top producers to slash output by 10 million barrels a day was having little impact on the oil crisis because of lockdowns and travel restrictions that are keeping billions of people at home.

WTI was hit particularly hard as its main US storage facilities in Cushing, Oklahoma, were filling up, with Trifecta Consultants analyst Sukrit Vijayakar saying refineries were not processing crude fast enough. There are also plenty of supplies from the Middle East with no buyers as "freight costs are high", he told AFP. "I think we will see a test of the 1998 lows at \$11 sooner rather than later," OANDA senior market analyst Jeffrey Halley told AFP. And AxiCorp's Stephen Innes added: "It's a dump at all cost as no one... wants delivery of oil, with Cushing storage facilities filling by the minute."

"It hasn't taken long for the market to recognize that the OPEC+ deal will not, in its present form, be



Caution grips Asia equities, Europe rises

enough to balance oil markets." Stock markets were mostly lower despite governments starting to consider how and when to ease lockdowns that have crippled the global economy.

Italy, Spain, France and Britain reported drops in daily death tolls and slowing infection rates, while Germany began allowing some shops to reopen and Norway restarted nurseries.

'No time to get cocky'

"We are scoring points against the epidemic," said French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, but he insisted "we are not out of the health crisis yet". Meanwhile, in the US, Andrew Cuomo, governor of badly hit New York state, said the disease was "on the descent", though he cautioned it was "no time to get cocky".

Mounting evidence suggests that the lockdowns and social distancing are slowing the spread of the

virus. That has intensified planning in many countries to begin loosening curbs on movement and easing the crushing pressure on national economies. Caution gripped Asian share markets yesterday amid expectations a busy week of corporate earnings reports and economic data will drive home the damage done by the global virus lockdowns. European stocks were headed for a strong start, however, with the pan-region EUROSTOXX 50 futures up 1.23 percent, German DAX futures gaining 1.26 percent and FTSE futures up 0.93 percent. E-Mini futures for the S&P 500 slipped 0.46 percent, having jumped last week on hopes some US states would soon start re-opening their economies.

Japan reported its exports fell almost 12 percent in March from a year earlier, with shipments to the United States down over 16 percent. Readings on April manufacturing globally are due on Thursday and are expected to hit recession-era lows. Better news came from New Zealand where success in containing the virus allowed the government to announce an easing in the country's strict lockdown from next week.

MSCI's broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan eased 0.23 percent in slow trade, pausing after five straight weeks of gains. Japan's Nikkei fell 1.19 percent, but Chinese shares edged up 0.37 percent as a benchmark lending rate was lowered to shore up the coronavirus-hit Chinese economy after it con-

tracted for the first time in decades.

US President Donald Trump said on Sunday that Republicans were "close" to getting a deal with Democrats on a support package for small business. The United States has by far the world's largest number of confirmed coronavirus cases, with more than 750,000 infections and over 40,500 deaths, according to a Reuters tally.

Shanghai, Mumbai and Bangkok rose while London, Paris and Frankfurt edged up in early trade. But most other markets were in retreat. Hong Kong was flat, while Tokyo fell more than one percent as Japan struggles to contain the disease, while Sydney shed 2.5 percent. Seoul dropped 0.8 percent and Manila dropped one percent. There were also losses in Taipei, Singapore, Wellington and Jakarta.

"The longer investors have to contemplate future economic issues while they wait for more countries to be on the downward slope of the pandemic curve, the more scope there is of risk assets pricing in a difficult future," Chris Iggo, of AXA Investment Managers UK, said. Investors are keeping an eye on Washington, where Congress and the White House are working towards a \$450 billion economic relief plan for small business to add to the trillions already pledged to support the economy. Big-name companies including IBM, Netflix and Coca-Cola are due to deliver their earnings reports. — Agencies

Virus wipes away Afghan toilet-paper maker's plans

KABUL: Afghan toilet paper entrepreneur Zuhail Atmar overcame patriarchy and security threats to build a business that was set to go global due to a coronavirus-induced shortage.

But then, the supply of her key raw material—trash-dried up. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a lockdown in Kabul, forcing scavengers off the streets and slashing access to the waste paper and cardboard which Atmar recycles into pink-and-white loo roll.

As she prepared to suspend operations at her factory, she told AFP the virus was "the biggest challenge" she had ever faced. "Even while dealing with security risks, we were still able to do business. Now I have no option but to throw my hands up," the 35-year-old said.

Her plight highlights the global nature of the pandemic which has disrupted lives across the world, posing a huge challenge even to businesses used to working under sharp constraints.

A rare female face in Afghanistan's male-dominated business world, Atmar is well-versed in the art of finding creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems. When the government imposed the lockdown to stop the spread of infections last month, she promptly

approached local hospitals offering to barter their waste paper for surplus masks she had purchased before the crisis hit.

"But the discussions didn't go anywhere," she said ruefully.

'Scary threats'

As a female entrepreneur in a country where women have long battled to have their voices heard, Atmar fought hard to build her company Gul-e-Mursal ("Damask Rose"). "To get a loan, you need a guarantor, a business partner, and of course collateral," she said. "Women don't usually have access to any of this—men have better networks and in most cases, family property goes to sons, not daughters, so there's no collateral," she added.

Her background as a consultant to international organizations in Afghanistan helped Atmar overcome some early challenges, with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) giving her a \$100,000 loan to purchase equipment from China. She also ploughed her savings into the business, but more difficulties lay in wait.

A lack of qualified technicians meant Atmar had to hire specialists from China and Pakistan to help run the complex machines that wash, pulp, dry and transform cardboard and paper waste into loo roll.

"Electricity is always a nightmare," she says, referring to hours-long blackouts that prevented the factory from functioning at full capacity, even before the lockdown. And then there were the "scary threats" she



KABUL: In this file photo taken on January 22, 2008 Afghan boys selling toilet paper wait for customers in Kabul. — AFP

received, allegedly from male competitors.

"It's not easy to do this. It needs courage," she said. When she first visited the recycling factory—located in a conservative, run-down Kabul neighborhood—five years ago, she didn't see a single woman on the streets. Today her company is 30 percent female with women working on the factory floor, in marketing, and as paid interns.

"I want to hire more women... because I can understand their problems, the difficulties they suffer", she said. Mother to a four-year-old boy, Atmar says Afghan women are forced to make difficult trade-offs in pursuit of their dreams.

"The social mentality here will not allow any woman

to have it all because her ambition is considered to be at odds with ideas of family life," she says. Born into an upper middle-class family—her mother was a teacher—Atmar had little doubt that she would pursue a career, even as her life was upended by a brutal civil war. The family fled to Pakistan and only returned to Kabul after the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

Dreams dashed

Before the lockdown, Atmar's company processed four tonnes of waste in a day, a fraction of the 7,000 metric tons of garbage collected daily by Kabul's municipality, underlining the scale of the city's trash problem—and the potential for her business to grow. Expansion loomed on the horizon earlier this year as global demand for toilet paper surged in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and the panic-buying it sparked around the world. Atmar struck a deal to sell her products in the US and Europe, but now, with the factory set to run out of raw material, that seems all but impossible.

"We can't even buy the chemicals we need anymore because they are not available in Kabul and the borders are closed so we can't import it easily from Pakistan," she said.

Now, the factory will likely be shut for several weeks at least, she said. With the fate of her 70 employees hanging in the balance, she said she was desperately hoping for a miracle to resume production as soon as possible. "I know that behind every successful woman is a story with many ups and downs," she said. "It is not easy to keep going but we will reopen again." — AFP

Business

Japan boosts stimulus to \$1.1tn as virus threatens deeper recession

Extra budget revised up to 25.7tn yen from 16.8tn yen

TOKYO: Japan is boosting its new economic stimulus package to expand cash payouts to its citizen as the coronavirus fallout threatens to push the world's third-largest economy deeper into recession.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe unveiled the new stimulus less than two weeks after his cabinet approved an earlier plan to spend 108.2 trillion yen (\$1 trillion), which had detailed payouts of 300,000 yen to households with sharp drops in incomes hit by the outbreak. Abe has caved into pressure from within his own ruling bloc to boost the help with a payment of 100,000 yen

outs include the rich and the people whose incomes are not suffering, so savings will also rise," said Ryutaro Kono, chief economist at BNP Paribas Securities. "Even considering more people will suffer an economic pain this time than during the 2009 financial crisis, the proportion of the payouts that will be spent is estimated at about 40%. As such, it would push up GDP only by 0.3 percentage points."

The upsized package will total 117.1 trillion yen (\$1.086 trillion), with fiscal measures making up less than half of it, a draft reviewed by Reuters showed. Some 25.7 trillion yen will be funded by an extra budget for the fiscal year from April 1, compared with an initial extra budget worth 16.8 trillion yen.

Monetary, fiscal policy mix

While the government boosts fiscal stimulus, the Bank of Japan has also joined other central banks to roll out stimulus to stave off the risk of global recession. The BOJ eased monetary policy last month by pledging to boost risky asset purchases and create a new loan scheme to pump more money into firms hit by slumping sales. The central bank will discuss further steps to ease corporate funding strains at this month's rate review as the impact hits profits.

The government now plans to issue extra bonds worth 25.6914 trillion yen to fund the supplementary budget, the draft showed. Of the extra bond issuance, some 23.3624 trillion yen will be deficit-covering bonds and the remainder will be used to finance infrastructure spending, bringing the amount of market issuance to the upper range of 152 trillion-153 trillion yen.



TOKYO: Commuters walk past closed shops in an underground shopping mall in Tokyo railway station.— AFP

The extra borrowing will add to the industrial world's heaviest public debt burden, which is more than twice the size of Japan's \$5 trillion economy. It is rare for the government to compile an extra budget at the start of a new fiscal year, and it is even rarer to revise a budget draft that has been approved by the cabinet after coordinating closely with the ruling coalition.

Last week, the prime minister, who has been criti-

cized by some over his handling of the pandemic, apologised for confusion over a plan to start distributing coronavirus relief payments next month.

Abe's cabinet is expected to endorse the stimulus spending plan as early as yesterday. More than 200 people have died from the virus in Japan, which has reported over 11,000 infections, of which more than a quarter are in Tokyo.— Reuters



Desperate steps as recession deepens

for every citizen instead of 300,000 yen for limited households, analysts say, even as the new amount triples the cost to 12 trillion yen from what the government had originally planned.

Expansion of the scheme may support private consumption that accounts for more than half of the economy, some analysts said, while others believe most of the payout would end up in savings rather than spending to shore up the economy. "Recipients of the pay-

Crops rot as Italian farmers hit by virus, drought

FASANO, Italy: Floriana Fanizza gazes desolately at her celery crop, lost to the coronavirus because it could not be harvested. Italian farmers are being brought to their knees by a six-week lockdown aimed at stopping a deadly epidemic in its tracks. They are also suffering a drought caused by the driest spring in more than half a century.

Border blocks, restaurant closures and a lack of seasonal workers mean nearly four out of 10 businesses in the fruit and vegetable sector are struggling, according to Italy's biggest agricultural union Coldiretti. On the Fanizza family farm in Fasano, a town near the Puglia coast in southern Italy, some pickers, fearful for their health, stayed at home as the country went into shutdown at the start of March.

That meant there were not enough hands to harvest the celery and turnip crops, which were ruined. The clock is now ticking on seeding vegetables for harvesting this summer.

"To sow properly, we need seven or eight people," 41-year-old Fanizza says.

"We hope we'll be able to find them, otherwise we will have to reduce production." Some 350,000 foreigners are usually employed seasonally in Italy's agriculture sector. The coronavirus crisis means this year there is a shortage of between 250,000 and 270,000, according to the farming ministry.

Urgent action needed

"Something must be done urgently, as the harvests of strawberries, asparagus, artichokes and greenhouse fruits (such as melons, tomatoes and peppers) are already underway," Coldiretti said in a



A man wearing a face mask works in the vineyards to prepare the 2020 harvest as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues, in Langhe-Roero area, Cuneo, Italy on Sunday.— AFP

note. And others will soon begin, such as cherries, apricots and plums, it said.

The production crisis could impact food availability. Italy's agricultural sector is the third biggest in Europe in terms of overall value-it was worth 56.6 billion euros (\$61.5 billion) in 2019 — after France (75.4 billion euros) and Germany (57 billion euros). With Romanians alone accounting for 110,000 of the country's 350,000 foreign seasonal workers, Rome is in talks with Bucharest over "green corridors" to ease movement between the two countries.

Minister of Agriculture Teresa Bellanova has also called for mass regularization of undocumented migrants in Italy in order to get the economy moving again. Many are currently living in shanty towns and are exploited by the mafia and an illegal labor system known as "caporalato", where intermediaries who bring workers to farmers take a large

part of their meager wages. The proposal, approved by Coldiretti, was slammed by the far-right.

Driest spring in 60 years

The virus is not the farmers' only problem. Italy is also experiencing its driest spring in the last 60 years.

It has seen just over half its usual rainfall since the beginning of the year, creating a water shortage the size of Lake Como—the third largest lake in Italy, according to weather experts. "It hasn't rained for a long time and the land is arid, especially for wheat," farmer Fanizza says. "The situation is critical, we need to irrigate our fields".

The government has set up a 100 million euro fund to support agricultural businesses.

Rome has also forked over 50 million euros to buy food and distribute it to Italy's poorest, a three-pronged approach aimed at helping the hungry, cutting waste and preventing price drops.— AFP

Dubai's largest bank profit slides over virus

DUBAI: Emirates NBD, Dubai's largest bank, yesterday reported a 24 percent slide in first quarter net profits after making huge provisions for risks resulting from the impact of coronavirus. The bank posted \$567 million (2.1 billion dirhams) in net profit for the three months to March compared to \$747 million in the same period in 2019, the bank said in a statement. "Net profit declined 24 percent year on year due to higher impairment charges," said Emirates NBD, the second-largest lender in the United Arab Emirates.

The bank put aside \$697 million for risks "in recognition of a potential deterioration in credit quality in subsequent quarters related to the coronavirus pandemic," it said. "During these uncertain times, we have aimed to ensure that we continue to provide customers with uninterrupted banking." CEO Shayne Nelson said. "Despite higher provisions in the first quarter of 2020, the Bank delivered a good set of results... whilst maintaining healthy capital, liquidity and credit quality ratios."

The provisions made by the bank are 350 percent more than the corresponding quarter last year. The bank's net interest and non-interest incomes increased in the first quarter by 45 percent and 48 percent respectively. The assets of Emirates NBD, which last year acquired Turkish lender DenizBank, rose a modest one percent to \$188.5 billion.

UAE's central bank said on April 5 that it had doubled to \$70 billion a stimulus package aimed at supporting the economy and domestic banks in the face of coronavirus. Most of the measures focused on easing financial and liquidity requirements for banks to free up cash for lending. The regulator's measures also allowed banks to defer clients' repayments of loans until the end of 2020. UAE has introduced strict measures to combat the disease including imposing a lockdown on Dubai, halting travel and closing shopping malls and entertainment venues.—AFP

Middle East tourism fair in Dubai cancelled

DUBAI: Dubai's Arabian Travel Market, one of the Middle East's biggest travel and tourism fairs, has been cancelled this year due to the new coronavirus outbreak, organizers said on Sunday. The exhibition was in March rescheduled to June 28 to July 1 at Dubai's World Trade Centre from its original dates of April 19 to 22. "After consultation with our key stakeholders and after listening to our industry, ultimately it became apparent that the best course of action, and with everyone's best interests in mind, is to postpone the event to 2021," organizers said on the event's website.— Reuters

India airlines not to take bookings now

NEW DELHI: India's aviation regulator has told airlines not to take bookings as the government has not yet decided when to recommence flights after a lockdown scheduled to end on May 3. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) issued the notification after some Indian airlines started taking bookings for May 4 onwards.

Indigo, the country's largest airline, and Vistara, owned by Singapore Airlines and Tata Group, had said earlier they would begin operations in a phased manner from May 4. Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended the lockdown across India to May 3, from April 14, as the number of coronavirus cases spiked, but permitted some sectors to partially open up after April 20.— Reuters

Poor may lose clean electricity lifeline soon

BARCELONA: Companies that provide clean off-grid electricity to the poor in developing nations are searching for ways to stay afloat - and keep life-saving power on - through the coronavirus pandemic, as the economic fallout from the crisis empties customers' pockets. The nascent industry fears being starved of new capital as investors shun risk amid an expected recession - a crunch that could force weak firms out of business and scupper progress on a global goal to provide modern energy to everyone by 2030. In a survey by international organization Sustainable Energy for All, 80 businesses running mini-grids and selling solar home systems in Africa and Asia said they expected to lose on average 27 percent-40 percent of their revenues in the coming months due to COVID-19 impacts.

"We could be in the situation in six months' time where we have no off-grid companies to be talking about," said SEforALL CEO Damilola Ogunbiyi. "We cannot start from ground zero again... we cannot let that happen," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Many such companies, operating in Africa and Asia, rely on small daily or weekly payments from poor consumers who use mobile money on their phones to buy solar power from mini-grids or cover instalments on loans for home solar systems. But economists are warning that shutdowns to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus pose a major threat to the livelihoods of street vendors, farm labourers, construction workers and others with insecure employment.

Job losses could put regular payments for electricity or cooking gas out of reach, said Mansoor Hamayun, CEO of BBOX, which provides solar power to more than 1 million people.

"We don't want to switch off customers that suddenly have a week or one month of lack of income," said Hamayun, whose business operates off-grid solar systems in 12 countries, including Kenya, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Togo.

Abu Dhabi borrows \$7bn as low oil price bites

ABU DHABI: The emirate of Abu Dhabi said on Sunday it had sold \$7 billion of bonds in the third major sale this month by Gulf sovereigns seeking to counter slumping oil prices. OPEC kingpin Saudi Arabia last week raised \$7 billion in a bond sale, while gas-rich Qatar sold bonds worth \$10 billion two weeks ago.

Abu Dhabi, which has the biggest sovereign wealth fund in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), said its offering was oversubscribed by more than six times. The transaction contained three tranches—a \$2 billion five-year tranche, a \$2 billion 10-year segment, and a third tranche of \$3 billion maturing after 30 years—the Abu Dhabi department of finance said in a statement.

The richest of seven sheikhdoms that make up the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi sits on the bulk of the federation's oil wealth. Saudi Arabia's finance ministry said its international bond issuance attracted bids worth \$54 billion, more than seven times the value of its offering.

Qatar's finance ministry said its own sale was oversubscribed by more than four times.

The Kuwaiti government has sent legislation to parliament seeking to borrow \$65 billion over the next 10 years. The six GCC member states, which also include Bahrain and Oman, depend heavily on oil income for between 65 percent and 90 percent of public revenues. Global oil prices have slumped this year due to population lockdowns to forestall the spread of coronavirus and a price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia. An agreement by OPEC and its allies, including Russia, to cut output by a record 9.7 million barrels per day last week failed to revive prices. According to the International Monetary Fund, the combined economies of GCC states are forecast to shrink by 2.7 percent this year.—AFP

Company officials are now thinking through ways to help provide clients with electricity to meet their basic needs, such as offering five hours per day free and charging only for use on top of that.

For now, of the places it operates, only Rwanda has imposed a strict lockdown. BBOX is running some of its call centres remotely but it will be unable to ramp up a new gas-based clean cooking service in Kigali this year as planned, Hamayun said. The firm has not yet had to lay off staff based in Africa, he added, but cuts at its UK headquarters were unavoidable as new product development and innovation were put on hold. As a relatively large player in an emerging sector, BBOX is well-capitalized, Hamayun said, but it would need to spend quite a bit of that money on running its operations instead of growing, as raising cash from new sources was impossible in today's market. The SEforALL survey found cash positions were tight across the industry, with about 70 percent of off-grid companies having only enough available to cover operating expenses for two months or less. "If the money environment doesn't loosen up... unfortunately I think the progress the sector has made in the last year or two or three could be wiped out really quickly," said Hamayun. Companies that sell solar home systems and operate small-scale grids are seen as vital in getting electricity to the 840 million people still living without it, the vast majority in rural parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

COVID-19 or hunger?

Ogunbiyi, also a special representative of the UN secretary-general, said lockdowns to curb the spread of the new coronavirus have "really shown us what happens when we don't have electricity".

In Nigeria, her own country, there are about 100 million people who would struggle to comply with restrictions on movement because they have no electric power, meaning they cannot store food in fridges and must shop frequently. "If they stay at home, they will starve and they will die," she said, warning the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to another crisis in some poor countries: hunger.

Since the outbreak began hitting Africa, Ogunbiyi has been giving governments practical advice such as not hiking the price of cooking gas and ensuring off-grid power firms are classed as essential services so they can send out their technicians.—Reuters

Business

KAMCO Oil Market Monthly Report

Oil price declines on expectations of extended demand slowdown

IEA says oil demand expected to fall by 20 mb/d during Q2

KUWAIT: Brent crude spot prices reached the lowest since June-1999 at the end of March-2020 led by falling oil demand and the failed OPEC+ agreement at the start of Mar-2020. However, prices started recovering after talks of a production cut agreement resurfaced during the start of April-2020. Finally, after a marathon discussion between global oil producers, the OPEC+ announced a production cut of 9.7 mb/d on 12-April-2020 with further curbs of around 5 mb/d from other global producers. Most importantly, the US, Canada and Brazil, although did not promise on a specific level of production cuts, said their curbs would amount to around 3.7 mb/d due to lower prices. Moreover, in an interview with FT, Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister alluded to a price range of \$35-40/b in the near-term would result in curbs reaching as high as 20 mb/d after price-led decline forces producers to lower output in the coming months.

The record curbs came after global demand for crude oil plunged almost 30 percent due to the Covid-19 outbreak. The latest monthly crude import figures from China showed a m-o-m decline of 7.5 percent or almost 0.8 mb/d to reach 9.68 mb/d, the lowest imports since July-2019. In a recent interview, the chief of IEA said oil demand is expected to fall by 20 mb/d especially during the second quarter. Meanwhile, a statement from Rystad Energy said that oil demand for the year could decline by 4.9 percent or 4.9 mb/d to reach 95 mb/d as compared to 99 mb/d in 2019. The demand for jet fuel is expected to decline by almost 20 percent in 2020 to reach 5.8 mb/d, according to Rystad Energy. The report said that demand is expected to decline by 27 mb/d in April-2020 of which 5 mb/d would come from China, Japan and India.

In its most recent Short-Term Energy Outlook, the IEA estimated global petroleum and liquid fuels consumption to average at 94.4 mb/d in Q1-2020, a y-o-y decline of 5.6 mb/d. For the full year 2020, the IEA expects global demand will slide by 5.2 mb/d to reach 95.5 mb/d vs. 100.7 mb/d in 2019 and then gradually rise by 6.4 mb/d in 2021. The IEA, on the other hand, forecasted an even steeper demand destruction of 9.3 mb/d for 2020 said that oil demand is headed for the biggest annual collapse in the history of oil market. The agency said that demand in Q2-2020 is expected to decline by 23.1 mb/d y-o-y and gradually rise by the end of the year to a decline of around 2.7 mb/d in December-2020. On the supply side, expectations show that crude supply growth would continue to outpace demand growth in 2020 however the decline in shale patch would determine the extent of oil glut during the year. The IEA forecasted a full year 2020 decline of 2.3 mb/d reflecting the impact of OPEC+ production cuts on global oil supply. Meanwhile, the IEA said crude production in the US is estimated to decline for the first time since 2016 by around 0.5 mb/d to average at 11.8 mb/d in 2020. As a result, the IEA said that US would return to be a net importer of crude in Q3-2020.

Oil prices

Oil prices plunged almost 80 percent since the start of the year at the end of March-2020 as global oil demand took a severe hit due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Brent crude spot reached \$14.85/b on 31-

March-2020, the lowest in almost 21 years, whereas OPEC crude declined to \$16.85/b on 1-April-2020. Brent oil futures traded 22.74 at the end of March-2020 and recovered to \$34.11/b on talks of production cuts. The announcement to cut production did support oil prices but prices soon declined after estimates suggested that the cuts will be inadequate as compared to the severe decline in demand expected during the year. Prices were also hit following the weekly EIA report on oil inventory that showed crude supplies rising by 19.2 million barrels during the week ended 10-April-2020. This was the 12th consecutive week of rise in supplies.

The IEA expects global crude liquid fuels inventories to rise by an average 3.9 mb/d in 2020 as compared to 0.2 mb/d decline in 2019. The inventory build is expected to be the highest during the first half of the

Japan trade surplus dives 99% in March as virus hits exports

TOKYO: Japan's trade surplus dived 99 percent in March from a year earlier as coronavirus woes hit exports to its major trading partners, official data showed yesterday. The March surplus came in at 4.9 billion yen (\$45.5 million), less than one percent of the year-before figure of 517 billion yen, according to the finance ministry.

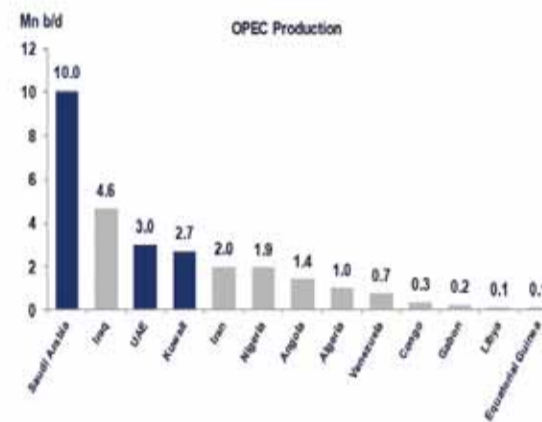
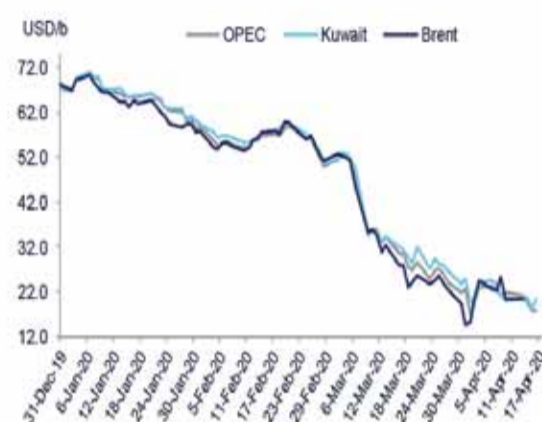
"Exports to the United States and Europe as well as to China fell as the global spread of virus infections hit demand," said Takeshi Minami, chief economist at Norinchukin Research Institute. "I'd say this is only the beginning," he told AFP, predicting exports would come under further pressure.

Shipments of automobiles and auto parts fell, while prospects are gloomy for semiconductors even though they managed to log growth in March, Minami said. "Production activities have stalled with sales of durable goods slack and corporate investment in plants and equipment halted," he said, adding it was difficult to find good export demand. Overall exports fell 11.7 percent, a drop for the 16th consecutive month, with US-bound shipments tumbling 16.5 percent and shipments to China falling 8.7 percent. Exports to the European Union fell 11.1 percent. "Exports fell sharply in March and are set to plummet this quarter as economic activity in most of Japan's major trading partners has collapsed," said Tom Learmouth, Japan economist at Capital Economics.—AFP

year led by travel restrictions as well as lockdown of multiple economies for consecutive weeks.

OPEC crude monthly average witnessed one of the steepest declines during March-2020 with a fall of 38.9 percent to average at \$33.91/b. Kuwait crude grade average also declined but a slightly smaller pace of 37.9 percent to average at \$35.14/b. The average of Brent crude spot prices saw the biggest monthly decline of 42.8 percent to average at \$31.7/b during March-2020.

The consensus estimates for crude prices for the year underwent a severe downgrade during the past few weeks. EIA expects Brent to average at \$33/b in 2020, a steep revision from last month's estimate of \$43/b. The median estimate for Brent crude, according to Bloomberg consensus estimate, was at \$42/b for 2020 gradually increasing to \$51.2/b in 2021.



Projections on oil prices and demand continues to change as new information is announced especially related to Covid-19 impact. The lowering of oil demand expectations by OPEC and other agencies affected prices but a positive indication came from Europe and China that reported relaxing of certain norms related to Covid-19 and opening up of economic activity, thereby offsetting some of the declines. Also, drilling activity in the US has declined by more than a third over the last five weeks as oil explorers grapple with the global glut. A number of companies have announced project cancellations and drastic cost cutting measures that is expected to result in a significant decline in shale production in the US.

Meanwhile, there were rising concerns among oil producers about crude storage capacity due to the steep decline in consumption. According to a Bloomberg report, storage constraints in Mexico is forcing Pemex to leave its fuel purchases in ships off the coast of Mexico with around 3 million barrels of refined products sitting in tankers off of the coast of Mexico resulting in rising cost of demurrage for the shippers. Key demand centers like the Asian market and the European markets have remained in shut downs since weeks and there are reports that buyers, especially in Asia, don't want cargoes because of low demand and also due to the freight charges on these shipments. The storage crunch situation was similar in the Middle East region with its main oil trading hub running out of storage capacities. According to

Italy firms shake lockdown using shortcut in law

ROME/MILAN: Weeks into Italy's coronavirus lockdown, thousands of Italian entrepreneurs have been given a bureaucratic shortcut to market. The government last week extended non-essential business closures to May 3. But more than 100,000 mainly small- and medium-sized companies have applied to keep going or partially reopen. In principle, a key hurdle for companies to do business should be that they can prove they are part of a supply chain to businesses that are deemed "essential" in a government decree, such as food, energy or pharmaceutical companies.

But the government, facing a backlog of applications, has clarified Italy's lockdown laws to say no companies need to wait for government approval to go ahead. More than 105,000 firms have applied to be considered part of essential supply chains, the interior minister said on Wednesday, in a guideline on its website to clarify the lockdown rules.

Of those, just over 2,000 have been turned down and told to suspend their business. More than 38,000 are being investigated and the rest are waiting to be looked at. The ministry said on Wednesday businesses that have previously submitted such requests can now "benefit from an immediate start" to their business. So unless companies have been told they are not critical, all they need to do is to inform their local authority that they plan to reopen. Then, without waiting for an

Bloomberg, terminal operators in Fujairah are turning down request from traders and refiners to store crude and refined products.

World oil demand

Global oil demand growth estimates for 2019 was kept unchanged at a 0.83 mb/d with demand expected to have averaged at 99.67 mb/d. For 2020, the forecast witnessed a steep revision owing to the ongoing decline in economic activity globally led by the Covid-19 pandemic. Oil demand is now expected to decline by 6.8 mb/d in 2020 and average at 92.82 mb/d during the year. According to OPEC, demand is expected to contract by 12 mb/d during Q2-2020 after falling by around 20 mb/d during April-2020. The pandemic has affected demand in the transportation and industrial fuels segments in China and has spread on a global



scale. Demand growth for the OECD region was revised lower by 3.7 mb/d to a decline of 4.0 mb/d in 2020 reflecting the impact of Covid-19 in OECD Europe, OECD Asia Pacific and the steep decline in gasoline usage in the US. The most recent demand data for the US showed sluggish demand from the road transportation and the industrial fuels segment during Q1-2020 which is expected to spill over to 2H-2020. Meanwhile, in the OECD Europe region, demand declined by 0.71 mb/d during January-2020, the largest monthly decrease in eight years during a month when the full impact of Covid-19 was not ascertained. New car registrations also showed a decline during February-2020 with strong declines in the region's largest auto markets, including Germany, France, Italy and UK. Meanwhile, the non-OECD region is expected to see a demand contraction of 2.9 mb/d reflecting steep decline in oil requirements especially in China and Other Asia regions.

Oil demand in India, world's third-biggest market for crude, has taken a big hit due to the shut downs that was extended until the first week of May-2020. According to provisional sales data from three state-run fuel retailers in India, demand for diesel and gasoline declined by more than 60 percent during the first half of April-2020. The two products account for more than half of India's fuel consumption. Demand is expected to see some uptake after relaxations being planned from this week for some industries and the farming sector to resume operations as well as for

answer, they can go ahead. The flood of notifications by Italian companies underscores the desperation of corporations to restart production. This is especially true in Italy where nearly 4 million companies employing fewer than 10 people make up the fabric of the economy. Italy's experience also highlights the challenge for governments across developed countries to oversee shutdowns that are crippling their economies.

The government will carry out inspections to make sure companies are not cheating the system, a spokesperson for the interior ministry told Reuters. Big swaths of Italy's economy are unable to get back to work. Almost half of the country's businesses from fashion to autos generating 1.3 trillion euros (\$1.41 trillion) in annual turnover remain paralyzed - the fashion industry, for instance, unable to claim an "essential"



A worker wears a protective face mask in a factory of roll-forming machine maker Gasparini, in Mirano.— Reuters

ecommerce operations. Ports and air cargo operations are also set to start, according to government plans.

World oil supply

Global liquids production increased by 0.62 mb/d m-o-m during March-2020, according to preliminary data, and averaged at 99.86 mb/d. The increase came on the back of higher OPEC output after producers opened their taps post a failed OPEC+ meeting at the start of March-2020. Non-OPEC liquids production (including OPEC NGLs) declined by 0.20 mb/d and averaged at 71.25 mb/d led by decline in output from OECD Americas, Norway, Brazil and Kazakhstan. OPEC produced at an average rate of 28.61 mb/d, an increase of 0.8 mb/d pushing OPEC's share of total global production by 60 bps to 28.7 percent in March-2020. Non-OPEC oil supply growth estimates for 2019 was revised lower by 0.01 mb/d with supply growth now expected to have reached 1.98 mb/d and average at 64.97 mb/d during the year. For 2020, non-OPEC oil supply is expected to see a contraction of 1.50 mb/d to average at 63.47 mb/d led by decline in supply from Russia and Kazakhstan as per the renewed OPEC+ agreement followed by price led decline in supply from the US, Canada and a number of other oil producers. Oil supply estimates for the OECD region was revised lower by 1.22 mb/d and grow marginally by 0.04 mb/d to average at 29.98 mb/d with growth in supply expected to come only from Norway, Brazil, Guyana and Australia. Supply coming from the OECD Americas region was revised lower by 1.23 mb/d with supply from the US revised down by 1.05 mb/d led by a decline in active oil rigs in most shale patch, including the promising Permian Basin.

OPEC oil production & spare capacity

A failed discussion over the extension of production cuts resulted in an increase in production by OPEC countries towards the second half of March-2020. OPEC production averaged at 28.1 mb/d, according to Bloomberg data, registering a m-o-m growth of 150 tb/d in Mar-2020. Based on OPEC secondary sources, the production increase was much larger at 0.8 mb/d to an average rate of 28.61 mb/d. Both the data sources showed higher production in Saudi Arabia. According to Bloomberg data, the Kingdom increased production by 0.3 mb/d to a little over 10 mb/d, the highest production rate since more than a year. On the other hand, according to OPEC secondary sources, both Saudi Arabia and UAE increased production by 0.4 mb/d each during March-2020 whereas Venezuela, Iran and Iraq show declines totaling 170 tb/d. Oil production in Libya, which had recently reached over 1 mb/d, dropped to 100 tb/d in March-2020 and further down to 81 tb/d in Apr-2020 due to blockades and forced restrictions.

The renewed agreement reached between 23 producers of the OPEC+ group envisaged a production cut of around 9.7 mb/d. The cut would be for two months, May and June-2020 after which the cuts would be 7.7 mb/d until December-2020. Beyond that the cuts would be 5.8 mb/d for the sixteen months until April-2022. However, based on the most recent data, the agreed upon cuts would be more than 12 mb/d by the group. With prices continuing to decline with no signs of demand resurgence, the production cuts outside of the OPEC+ group could be much higher due to the high cost of production, project cancellations as well as a steep decline in investment in new oil wells announced by a number of global oil E&P companies.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia announced that it would slash exports to Asia by around 2 mb/d from May-2020 and provide around 4 mb/d to its Asian buyers, in line with its commitment to the renewed OPEC+ deal. The Kingdom has said that it would provide its buyers with around 8.5 mb/d of oil during May-2020. The Kingdom's energy minister as well as Russia have signaled that the two producers are ready to cut their oil production even further if needed when the OPEC+ meets again in June-2020 depending on the trends in oil demand at the time of the meeting.

role, has taken out newspaper adverts to plead for a chance to reopen.

Masks and one-way paths

One company that has gone ahead is Gasparini S.p.A., a maker of metal processing machines in the northern region of Veneto where more than 14,600 people have tested positive for the virus.

Gasparini makes machines used to manufacture products from industrial shelving to components for electricity transmission and metal posts for vineyards. It had to halt production for two weeks. But the company says some of its customers, which make power generation and distribution systems, are in "essential" supply chains. As a result, it has found a way back to work.— Reuters

COVID-19 a 'test run' for greener lifestyles?

LONDON: Working from home and other measures to help stem the spread of the coronavirus outbreak in Britain show how quickly the country could change its ways to address climate change too, participants in the Climate Assembly UK said on Sunday.

"With coronavirus, (the government) has had to act because they had no choice in the matter. With climate change, they need to act in the same way," said Marc Robson, 46, a British Gas installer and one of the 110 members of the citizens' assembly. As with the response to the COVID-19 respiratory disease, "people will die if we don't do it", the Newcastle resident warned in a video interview.

"And we all need to buy into this as well. It needs to be explained to the public that if we don't change what we're doing, it's going to cost us, big time." The assembly, chosen to reflect Britain's diverse geographic and demographic makeup, as well as different viewpoints on climate change, has met once a month in Birmingham since January to hear from experts on climate science and policy.

It is expected to submit over the summer its recommendations to the government on how Britain should meet a legally binding goal to cut its climate-heating emissions to net zero by 2050.

But with coronavirus restrictions now in place on public gatherings, the assembly this weekend was held for the first time online - a change some assembly members saw as a "test run" for potential climate-smart shifts they had been discussing. "This has opened up my mind that we can make these changes, like working at home," Robson told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Sarah Allan, the head of engagement at Involve UK, a charity helping run the assembly, said some members of the group had asked to discuss coronavirus during this weekend's event and reflect on "how it makes them feel about what they've heard".

Ibrahim Wali, 42, a physician based in Surrey, said he had been conducting COVID-19 assessments via telephone and video-link since the outbreak began and realized "it's doable".

"People could stay home more, work remotely. Sometimes in life you just need a challenge to change the way you live and operate," he said. What he had learned more generally at the assembly sessions also had led him to install LED lightbulbs at home, look at switching to a hybrid or electric car and reconsider how often he eats meat, which has a large carbon footprint.

"If you can do that on an individual level, that's where it starts. Then it's friends, family, society," he said in a video interview. Reducing emissions "is not just something for the government to do. I thought in the past the government would sort it all out with laws and legislation. But it makes a huge difference if everyone looks at themselves and makes a change," he added.

Knowledge for all

Ellie, a 21-year-old assembly member and new university graduate from North London, who did not want her surname to be used, said she had started taking part in the gatherings confident "technology will solve all the problems". "I've been made aware of how actually it's acceptance there's going to be a change in our lifestyles and we will have to compro-



LONDON: Participants in the Climate Assembly UK said on Sunday that working from home and other measures to help stem the spread of the coronavirus outbreak in Britain show how quickly the country could change its ways to address climate change too. — Reuters

mise," she said. "We can't rely on tech and someone else doing it for us. It has to be all of us working together".

The assembly's meetings had given her a much better understanding not just of the range of options available to deal with global warming, she said, but how they might affect people living very different lives from hers, including in rural areas.

"If we're going to make genuine progress, there needs to be a real awareness of what the options are, the impact they will have on different groups and what's actually financially viable," she said. The assembly participants said they wished everyone in Britain could have access to the information they had received from experts speaking at the

gatherings. "There's a real kind of segregation - between people who know a lot about climate change and people who don't - and that's creating problems and tensions," Ellie said. "If we can educate everyone to the same level, we can create a real consensus for progress," she added. — Reuters

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248 33 199

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Tele:1802 555

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Lifestyle | Features



A piece of coronavirus COVID-19 themed street art graffiti is pictured in East London on April 19, 2020, during the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. The number of people in Britain who have died in hospital from coronavirus has risen by 596 to 16,060 according to daily health ministry figures on Sunday.—AFP

Monkeys, elephants and dogs reclaim India's streets in virus lockdown

Hundreds of monkeys have taken over the streets around India's presidential palace, leading an animal offensive taking advantage of deserted streets as the country remains under a coronavirus lockdown. With India's 1.3 billion population and tens of millions of cars conspicuous by their absence, stray domestic animals and wildlife has moved to fill the void, while also suffering from the pandemic fallout. In the financial capital Mumbai, peacocks have been seen perched on top of parked cars, displaying their spectacular trains.

In Delhi, troops of monkeys now scamper over the walls of the Rashtrapati Bhawan presidential compound, past military guards and into the grounds of ministries and other official buildings. "They are stealing a lot more, but not yet threatening humans," said one officer on duty at the palace entrance. The Rhesus macaque monkeys — who often snatch food from shoppers' bags — have long been a problem in the capital, but there have been reports of some getting into office buildings during the lockdown.

Other animals have also been emboldened by the coronavirus restrictions on humans, who are only allowed out for food and essential items. A Himalayan black bear last week wandered into Gangtok, capital of the northeastern state of Sikkim, entering a telecoms office and injuring an engineer, media reported.

Hungry strays

Indian Forest Service officers, meanwhile, have shared videos on social media of elephants trundling past shuttered shops along deserted streets. But the lockdown has also been deadly for some animals. Four horses normally employed for tourist carriage rides near Kolkata's landmark Victoria Memorial have died from starvation in recent days, animal rights activists said.

Some 115 horses, which make their living pulling carriages bedecked with flowers and balloons, were left to fend for themselves after the government ordered the shutdown, Sushmita Roy, spokeswoman for the Love and Care for Animals group told AFP. "They are becoming sick. We fear many more will die in coming days if they do not get food," she said. The owners of the carriages say they have no money for the horses after being ordered off the streets. "We are finding it difficult to feed our family. How can we feed our horses?" said one owner, Sunny. India's army of stray cows and dogs have also found new freedom to take over city intersections and forage in waste bins, but even those scraps have disappeared as restaurants and shops have closed. Aditi Badam of the Posh Foundation in Noida, outside Delhi, said shelters like his were struggling to feed its animals and other strays during the lockdown. Her foundation has been receiving increasing numbers of calls about abandoned dogs and pets, which he said had become a "major issue". "It getting tougher day by day here," Badam told AFP, adding that strays near the office blocks of multinational companies and outsourcing firms in the city were starving as all had closed down.—AFP



In this photograph stray dogs gather on a deserted road during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Kolkata.—AFP photos



In this file photo monkeys climb on a car as they are being fed with potatoes by a resident at Ode village.—AFP

San Diego Comic Con canceled due to coronavirus

Comic-Con San Diego, one of the world's largest pop culture gatherings, has been canceled for the first time in its 50-year history due to the coronavirus pandemic. The sprawling convention which draws Hollywood A-listers, billion-dollar franchises and 135,000 screaming fans each year had been due to take place in July. But it became the latest major festival to be scratched due to the global pandemic, after California Governor Gavin Newsom this week indicated mass gatherings were unlikely to be allowed for months to come. Organizers announced Friday "with deep regret that there will be no Comic-Con in 2020."



San Diego Comic-Con's logo

They "had hoped to delay this decision in anticipation that COVID-19 concerns might lessen by summer," but warnings including Newsom's comments "made it clear that it would not be safe to move forward with plans for this year." Fans who had already purchased tickets for the four-day extravaganza will be offered refunds, or the option of attending in 2021. Comic-Con began life as a small gathering of around 100 comic book fans in a San Diego hotel basement in 1970. But it has sprawled into a giant launchpad for mainstream Hollywood films and television shows attended by movie stars, studio heads and the world's press. In scrapping its 2020 edition, Comic-Con follows other major US events such as the Coachella music festival, Las Vegas Cinema-Con summit, and SXSW media and technology festival in Texas. "The prospect of mass gatherings is negligible, at best, until we get herd immunity, and we get to a vaccine," Newsom warned at a press conference Tuesday. "When you suggest June, July, August, it is unlikely."—AFP

Reese Witherspoon says her 'anxiety manifests as depression'

The 44-year-old actress has children Ava, 20 and Deacon, 16, with her ex-husband Ryan Phillippe and Tennessee, seven, with husband Jim Toth and revealed that she had mental health struggles after welcoming two of her kids. Speaking on Jameela Jamil's I Weigh podcast, Reese explained: "I definitely had anxiety, my anxiety manifests as depression so I would get really depressed. My brain is like a hamster on a wheel and it won't come off, I've been managing it my entire life."

"I've had three kids. After each child I had a different experience... One kid I had kind of mild postpartum, and one kid I had severe postpartum where I had to take pretty heavy medication because I just wasn't thinking straight at all, and then I had one kid where I had no postpartum at all." She also revealed she had a particularly tough time after giving birth to Ava, because she didn't know what to expect. Reese explained: "We don't understand the kind of hormonal rollercoaster that you go on when you stop nursing. No one explained that to me. I was 23 years old when I had my first baby and nobody explained to



Reese Witherspoon

me that when you wean a baby, your hormones go into the toilet. I felt more depressed than I'd ever felt in my whole life. It was scary."

Reese's former husband Ryan, 45, previously spoke out about his own mental health struggles, explaining: "You know, depression has been a huge obstacle for me ever since I was a child. As you get older I think it decreases some, but I'm just innately kind of a sad person. "I'm empathetic, and I take on the feelings of others and transpose myself into the position of others. I see it in my daughter [Ava]. "She has it, and I wish to hell she didn't."—Bang showbiz

Paparazzi vie for scraps as Hollywood celebrities hide from virus

With Hollywood A-listers self-quarantined in their sprawling mansions due to the novel coronavirus, Los Angeles' notorious paparazzi have almost nobody to shoot — despite soaring demand for celebrity pictures. The trendy nightclubs, restaurants and movie sets which are typically surrounded by photographers at all hours have been closed since California went into pandemic lockdown a month ago. This has meant images of gossip magazine staples such as Ben Affleck walking his dogs, or Cameron Diaz popping out for groceries, are a hot commodity, with dozens of paparazzi vying for the same photos.

Every photo is with sunglasses and a mask on at this point... those are the only pictures you're going to get," said Randy Bauer, founder of celebrity photo agency Bauer-Griffin. "It's really not a pretty situation," he added. Bauer estimates that his agency's photo output dropped almost overnight by 95 percent after stay-at-home orders were issued and most businesses shuttered. His agency, which employs around 20 photographers mainly on a freelance basis, went from issuing up to 7,000 celebrity photographs a month to around 500. "That's if we're lucky," he told AFP. "The whole thing has been turned upside down."

'Bittersweet'

Paparazzi are just one of countless strands of the Hollywood entertainment industry decimated by the lockdown. With movie premieres canceled, traditional red-carpet photographers are also out of work. Ironically, the absence of these glitzy images — used by newspaper, magazines and television networks around the world — has heightened demand for the street snaps delivered by paparazzi. Even images of D-listers who previously wouldn't have drawn global interest are being greedily snapped up by showbiz publishers.

"It's very bittersweet, because we've got the demand, but no supply!" said Bauer. "But you can't have it all." And there is another silver lining for those still in the paparazzi game. The long-lens nature of street shots — often taken from cars — at least allows for social distancing, in contrast to the massed photographers previously breathing down each other's necks at premieres or outside clubs.

'Waiting, waiting'

Of course, the industry's controversial reputation means sympathy for paparazzi is likely to be limited. "Some outside my house right now. Waiting, waiting for a walk that will never happen," wrote model Chrissy Teigen this week in a tweet that drew 350,000 "likes." Photographer Mark Karloff, speaking on a recent episode of his "Paparazzi Podcast," admitted that "obviously the general public's gonna give us a big boohoo about, you know, paparazzi struggling." "But we are family guys — we have kids,



Ben Affleck and new girlfriend Ana de Armas.

we have family — and we're human as well," he said. Bauer, who had photographers permanently stationed outside top celebrity hangouts like Craig's Restaurant in West Hollywood, now advises freelancers on applying for unemployment. For the first time, gig workers are eligible for benefits due to the coronavirus, providing paparazzi with some relief.

Still, with celebrity sightings in such short supply, the prospect of a big payday continues to draw many out to the same handful of Hollywood stars' homes. "It was like the Wild West man," said Karloff's podcast co-host, who goes by the alias "Jedi." "I'd drive past Kate Hudson's house and see four or five different guys there."—AFP

Montreux Jazz Festival cancelled amid pandemic



Montreux Jazz Festival poster

The iconic Montreux Jazz Festival announced the cancellation of this year's edition due to the pandemic, marking the first time since 1967 that the show cannot go on. "It is with deep regret that the organizers of the Montreux Jazz Festival must announce that this year's event, which was set to be held from 3 to 18 July 2020, will not take place," organizers said.

The program — set to include Lionel Richie, Brittany Howard, Lenny Kravitz and Black Pumas — "will be partly carried over to next year's Festival, which will take place from 2 to 17 July 2021." The Swiss government announced on Thursday it would begin gradually easing some protective measures against the coronavirus, but stressed most of the hygiene and physical distancing measures would remain in place. "As such, it is now impossible for us to consider holding an event on the scale of Montreux

Jazz Festival in July," the statement said, pointing out that other festivals had also been called off across Switzerland. "Public health concerns naturally take precedence over all other considerations," it said.

This thus marks the first time in the festival's 53 years of existence that the event has been cancelled. "Until the very end, all of us here in the festival team were still hoping to share these magical moments with everyone who, like us, cannot imagine a summer without the Montreux Jazz Festival," the organizers said. Montreux, which takes place in the idyllic Swiss town, on the shores of Lake Geneva, has over the past half century become a magnet for big names and rising stars alike. The jazz label has been retained despite a dramatically expanding repertoire over the years.—AFP

Olivia Munn 'homeschooling' her dogs during lockdown

Olivia Munn joked she's been "homeschooling" her dogs during lockdown. The 'Love Wedding Repeat' actress teased her co-star Sam Claflin — who is at home with his two young children amid the coronavirus pandemic — and insisted she knew what he was going through. She told Extra: "I'm at home, and I'm the parent to two dogs, so I get what he's going through. I understand! "We've got the alphabet up on our window too. A lot of homeschooling for me and my dogs!" Her comments came as Sam opened up on his own quarantine experiences in the same interview, and revealed how he has been balancing his personal and professional lives.

He said: "I'm a dad to two toddlers, and I am also working still. I feel like quarantine's been tough but in a very good way! I've had the opportunity to spend some quality time with the kids." Meanwhile, Olivia, 39, revealed she is grateful for the time to spend at home as production on films and TV shows has halted during the ongoing health crisis. She added: "I think that we all ask for the gift of time all the time, and right now, there's lots of scary stuff going on in the world. I've been trying to look at the sil-



Olivia Munn

ver lining. "At least for me, what I've thought about is right now, no one's expecting anyone to get any work done. Whether it's turning in a script, or meeting people for lunch — there's kind of this halt on everything. "In a way we've all been given this gift to sit home and breath without feeling like we're missing out on life or feeling guilty."

Olivia hopes to be able to emerge from the tough time "with a different energy", and she suggested she could benefit from the time to unwind. She explained: "There's a lot of times when I get invited to things and I'm just tired or don't want to go. I think now I'm able to really recalibrate myself and hopefully come out the other side with a different energy."—BangShowbiz

Lifestyle | Features

South African writer Deon Meyer looks back at his 2016 virus thriller

South African novelist Deon Meyer wished the deadly virus wrecking havoc in his 2016 thriller "Fever" had not turned into an eerily accurate depiction of the coronavirus pandemic ravaging the world. "I find no pleasure in it," said the crime fiction author and screenwriter. "I keep thinking of the sorrow of all those thousands of people who have lost loved ones, lost their jobs, and are living in fear." "Fever" tells the heart-wrenching story of the survival of a father and son in a desolated South Africa after a virus wiped out 95 percent of the world's population.

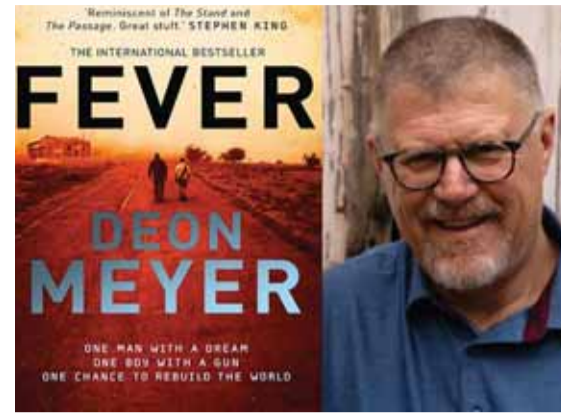
Upon release, the novel was widely acclaimed as a post-apocalyptic masterpiece worthy of Cormac McCarthy's "The Road", for which the American novelist received the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. Four years later, the parallels between Meyer's "Fever" and the COVID-19 pandemic are chilling: a coronavirus transmitted from animals to humans, spreading like wildfire across the globe. In a bizarrely premonitory scenario, borders are shut and characters grow increasingly wary of the other as survival instincts kick in. "Fever was the culmination of so many different emotions, concerns and a lot of reading," said Meyer, 61, speaking to AFP by phone, locked-down at his southern Stellenbosch home. "I've always loved post-apocalyptic fiction, and read the genre intensely in my 20s and 30s," he explained. "As I became more and more

aware of global warming, Ebola, the Avian Influenza (H5N1) of 1996 and the H1N1 Swine Flu virus of 2009 - 2010, I could not help but think that we live in a world where an apocalypse is a possibility." Those concerns became a source of inspiration in 2012 during a flight back from New York.

'The ideal choice'

"I bought a collection of short stories, and read them on the plane," Meyer recalled. "One of the stories... was post-apocalyptic and got me thinking about other possible directions the author could have taken." By the time Meyer touched down in Cape Town, the "Fever" storyline had started taking shape in his head. Over the next three years, the ex-journalist gathered scientific information to feed into his scenario. "I needed to kill off 95 percent of the world population, but leave all infrastructure intact," Meyer explained. "A virus seemed to be the ideal choice."

Hours of consultations with two virology experts led him to the "best candidate" for the task: a coronavirus. "They... gave me full details on how it could happen," said Meyer. The trio's imaginary scenario was fleshed out into the novel's pages. "A man somewhere in tropical Africa lay down under a mango tree," wrote Meyer. "The man's resistance was low, because he was HIV-positive and not being treated for it. There was already one corona virus in the man's blood." "In



South African novelist Deon Meyer

the mango tree there was a bat, with a different kind of corona virus in its blood," he continued. "One that could infect other people easily when inhaled, and with the ability to make them extremely ill."

When the first cases of coronavirus were detected in China last December, Meyer admitted going back through his notes in shock. "Even most of the developing countries had extensive plans for such an incident," reads another extract of "Fever". "In theory, these should have worked. But nature paid no heed to theories, and nor did human fallibility."

New inspiration

As he has watched a coronavirus play out in the real world, Meyer felt that most governments had based their responses on "good scientific advice". "So far, so good," he told AFP, alluding to US President Donald Trump as one of the "few exceptions". But the author also feared the consequences of potential months under lockdown. "How long will people be able to consider the greater good as more important than the survival of them and their families," he asked. Poorer nations, including South Africa, have already been battling to keep citizens indoors — most of whom live off informal work.

In "Fever", that struggle blows up into a full-fledged war between survivors under the watch of a small group of humans that has engineered the virus. Similar conspiracy theories are making the rounds of social media today, claiming the pandemic was man-made. Meyer hoped his novel would not provide fuel for "wacky conspiracy theorists". He found solace in the fact that such people were unlikely to "read beyond a few wacky websites". As South Africa slipped into its fourth week of lockdown and coronavirus continued to spread, Meyer knew what his next project would be. "A crime novel," he said. "Set during the lockdown".—AFP



French dancer from the Moulin Rouge, Mathilde, practices at home in Paris on the 23rd day of a strict lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the novel coronavirus.—AFP photos



Irish dancer from the Moulin Rouge, Isabelle, practices in the street next to her home in Paris.



Irish dancer from the Moulin Rouge, Isabelle, practices at home in Paris.

In virus lockdown, Moulin Rouge dancers go through their paces

Dancers from the Moulin Rouge in Paris, used to strutting their stuff before large, enthusiastic audiences, now have just the mirror, or sometimes a cat to perform for, as they combat lockdown stagnation with a strict exercise regime at home. Alone. Dancers of the famed cabaret who usually perform French cancan twice a day, six days a week, suddenly find themselves homebound, along with the rest of France due to the coronavirus outbreak. "Working out in my small 30 square-meter (apartment) can be a bit tricky," said Australian Courtney Male, 23, who has performed with the cabaret in Paris' touristy Montmartre district for over a year. "I try to keep everything as normal as possible," said the brunette, in a black leotard and ponytail, using the fireplace, as the highest feature in her apartment, for a dance bar.

"I work out in the afternoons, ballet bars, whole body workout" in an effort to stay fit without access to a gym or the Moulin Rouge's rehearsal space, she said. "Then I go for a walk or a run, depending on what I've done before, if my workout was strenuous or not that hard," Male added. The dancers must stay in tip-top shape, ready to tackle the physically demanding cancan as soon as the Moulin Rouge reopens along with other Paris entertainment venues shuttered to prevent the virus' spread. Many are in small, Parisian apartments. "For the workouts, (I do) my own routine which sometimes gets tiresome without machines or weights. I find inspiration online with a lot of free classes, yoga, pilates, ballet," said Male. Mathilde Tutiaux, 32, stretches out on her kitchen counter. "I am fortunate to have an open kitchen in my small living room," the Moulin Rouge dancer of eight years

told AFP. "I can put out a gym mat there, it gives me a bit of space. But not enough to dance..." Almost every day at 5:00 pm Tutiaux meets up with friends to exercise together... online.

Though the repertoire for now excludes leaps, spins, or practising "being lifted by the guys". And the dancers have to watch what they eat. "The costumes are made to measure, I cannot put on three or four kilos..." said Tutiaux. "And when you have so much free time, it is difficult not to just stick your head in the fridge." The Moulin Rouge's 450 employees, including 90 dancers, were placed on partial unemployment since the nationwide lockdown entered into force on March 17.—AFP



French dancer from the Moulin Rouge, Mathilde, practices in front of the Moulin Rouge cabaret.



Australian dancer from the Moulin Rouge, Courtney, practices at home in Paris.



Irish dancer from the Moulin Rouge, Isabelle, practices in the street next to her home.



Australian dancer from the Moulin Rouge, Courtney, practices at home in Paris.



Irish dancer from the Moulin Rouge, Isabelle, practices in the street next to her home.

Virus can't stop Germans getting their baguettes

German gourmets refuse to let a virus keep them from their favorite French pastries, with one even resorting to a fishing rod to reel in his baguettes. Residents in the German border town of Lauterbach are fond of popping across to neighboring Carling in France for their daily croissants. So when the border slammed shut to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many were bereft at no longer having access to their favorite boulangerie. But baker Myriam Janssem-Boualit is going the extra mile — or at least, the extra few metres to the border — to make sure her German customers can still have their daily loaf.

Hungry customers can telephone ahead with their orders, and Janssem-Boualit will meet them at the border crossing in the street outside her shop with the fresh baked delica-

cies. "There used to be a lot of Germans who came here to buy bread," she said. "They don't dare come any more because... there are checks. So what I can do now is bring the bread to them... across the barrier." Hartmut Fey, 52, is one of her happy customers. "It has to do with tradition. We've been buying our baguettes and bread here in France for decades," he said. Fey has even published a video on social media showing himself retrieving his baguettes with a fishing rod. "It was an idea of mine to create awareness," he said. Fishing tackle is not compulsory, but with a steady stream of customers at the barrier, it seems Fey is not the only one who is hooked.—AFP

'New York, New York' rings out across Big Apple to honor medical workers

New Yorkers usually clap, bang pots and pans, or simply cry "thank you" out of their windows every evening at 7 pm, honoring the health care workers risking their lives on the frontlines of the battle against the coronavirus. But the evening's ritual does vary. Last Thursday, a volunteer choir called "Peace of the Heart" led thousands singing "New York, New York," the beloved song made famous by Frank Sinatra. That classic echoed across neighborhoods for roughly ten minutes, coming out of windows and balconies, according to people posting on Facebook and other social media. "It's iconic, it's New York," said Robert Hornsby, fundraising director of "Peace of the Heart" about why they picked the song, "and it has a great message about getting out of it."

He added: "it is beloved, it is well known, and if you just don't know the words, you can just repeat the parts you do know." Streamed through the choir's Facebook page, New Yorkers could sing along or simply play the music out of their windows and from their balconies. Vivian Young, who

lives on First Avenue with her husband and two children, said from behind a mask that the everyday tribute to nurses, doctors and other health care professionals improves morale. "It's something you look forward to at the end of the day, instead of watching all the bad news," she added.

Her husband Mark, 49, said he hoped America's economic capital had turned a corner, citing the latest death figures and declining hospital admissions. "I think you are going to see the markets rebound. People will want to be outside. They will fight to get a table at restaurants," he said. "Hopefully, I am right." Yet, the ritual will continue for now. Although COVID-19 appears to have stabilized in the state — after more than 213,000 infections and over 11,500 deaths — governor Andrew Cuomo said Thursday he would prolong confinement measures in place across New York City for another month.—AFP

Recovery from coronavirus may not confer immunity

PARIS: Even as virologists zero in on the virus that causes COVID-19, a very basic question remains unanswered: Do those who recover from the disease have immunity? There is no clear answer to this question, experts say, even if many have assumed that contracting the potentially deadly disease confers immunity, at least for a while. "Being immunized means that you have developed an immune response against a virus such that you can repulse it," explained Eric Vivier, a professor of immunology in the public hospital system in Marseille. "Our immune systems remember, which normally prevents you from being infected by the same virus later on."

For some viral diseases such as measles, overcoming the sickness confers immunity for life. But for RNA-based viruses such as Sars-Cov-2 - the scientific name for the bug that causes the COVID-19 disease - it takes about three weeks to build up a sufficient quantity of antibodies, and even then they may provide protection for only a few months, Vivier told AFP. At least that is the theory. In reality, the new coronavirus has thrown up one surprise after another, to the point where virologists and epidemiologists are sure of very little.

"We do not have the answers to that - it's an unknown," Michael Ryan, executive director of the World Health Organization's Emergencies Program said in a press conference this week when asked how long a recovered COVID-19 patient would have immunity. "We would expect that to be a reasonable period of protection, but it is very difficult to say with a new virus - we can only extrapolate from other coronaviruses, and even that data is quite limited."

For SARS, which killed about 800 people across the world in 2002 and 2003, recovered patients remained protected "for about three years, on average," Francois Balloux director of the Genetics Institute at University College London, told AFP. "One can certainly get reinfected, but after how much time? We'll only know retroactively."

False negatives

A recent study from China that has not gone through peer review reported on rhesus monkeys that recovered from Sars-Cov-2 and did not get reinfected when exposed once again to the virus. "But that doesn't really reveal anything," said Pasteur Institute researcher Frederic Tangy, noting that the experiment unfolded over only a month. Indeed, several cases from South Korea - one of the first countries hit by the new coronavirus - found that patients who recovered from



CAIRO: A picture taken on April 18, 2020 show the Great Pyramids lit up with blue light and reading with a laser projection the message "Stay Home" on the Giza plateau outside the Egyptian capital on World Heritage Day. — AFP

COVID-19 later tested positive for the virus.

But there are several ways to explain that outcome, scientists cautioned. While it is not impossible that these individuals became infected a second time, there is little evidence this is what happened. More likely, said Balloux, is that the virus never completely disappeared in the first place and remains - dormant and asymptomatic - as a "chronic infection", like herpes.

As tests for live virus and antibodies have not yet been perfected, it is also possible that these patients at some point tested "false negative" when in fact they had not rid themselves of the pathogen. "That suggests that people remain infected for a long time - several weeks," Balloux added. "That is not ideal." Another pre-publication study that looked at 175 recovered patients in Shanghai showed different concentrations of protective antibodies 10 to 15 days after the onset of symptoms.

"But whether that antibody response actually means immunity is a separate question," commented

Maria Van Kerhove, Technical Lead of the WHO Emergencies Program. "That's something we really need to better understand - what does that antibody response look like in terms of immunity." Indeed, a host of questions remain. "We are at the stage of asking whether someone who has overcome COVID-19 is really that protected," said Jean-Francois Delfraissy, president of France's official science advisory board.

Immunity passports

For Tangy, an even grimmer reality cannot be excluded. "It is possible that the antibodies that someone develops against the virus could actually increase the risk of the disease becoming worse," he said, noting that the most serious symptoms come later, after the patient had formed antibodies. For the moment, it is also unclear whose antibodies are more potent in beating back the disease: Someone who nearly died, or someone with only light symptoms or even no symptoms at all. And does age make a difference?

Faced with all these uncertainties, some experts have doubts about the wisdom of pursuing a "herd immunity" strategy such that the virus - unable to find new victims - peters out by itself when a majority of the population is immune. "The only real solution for now is a vaccine," Archie Clements, a professor at Curtin University in Perth Australia, told AFP. At the same time, laboratories are developing a slew of antibody tests to see what proportion of the population in different countries and regions have been contaminated. Such an approach has been favored in Britain and Finland, while in Germany some experts have floated the idea of an "immunity passport" that would allow people to go back to work. "It's too premature at this point," said Saad Omer, a professor of infectious diseases at the Yale School of Medicine. "We should be able to get clearer data very quickly - in a couple of months - when there will be reliable antibody tests with sensitivity and specificity." — AFP

Iran-US tensions decrease in Iraq

BAGHDAD: It has been weeks since Iran-backed factions in Iraq traded fire with US forces, but experts warn the rivals could be using the time to prepare for an escalation. After the last Katyusha rockets slammed into American installations in Iraq in March, the United States began planning an unprecedented bombing campaign in Iraq and new Iran-aligned factions threatened to kill Western ambassadors.

"Even if we haven't seen rocket attacks, the Iranians are repositioning themselves for something else," said Phillip Smyth, who researches Shiite armed factions for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "Meanwhile, US troops in Iraq are hunkered down and taking the threat more seriously," Smyth said. Those troops, deployed as part of the coalition fighting the Islamic State group, have been hit by more than two dozen rocket attacks that have grown gradually deadlier.

Last month, the Pentagon began drafting plans for a major escalation against the Iran-backed factions - namely the hardline Kataeb Hezbollah - blamed for the rockets. "Washington told us they'd simultaneously hit 122 targets in Iraq if more Americans died," a top Iraqi official said. The scale of such bombing could have enormous consequences.

Coalition head General Pat White feared it could spin out of control, writing to US Central Command in March with "concerns" that targeted groups would respond, putting thousands of coalition troops in "significant" danger, according to a US military official who saw White's memo. Non-US coalition members are "nervous" the bombing could kill civilians or push Baghdad to permanently oust foreign troops, diplomats from two coalition countries said.

The plan has been set aside for now as the US fights the spread of COVID-19, three Western diplomats said. "But if there's another attack and it kills an American, then all of this comes back again," one told AFP.

Washington and Tehran have already edged dangerously close to outright conflict after the US killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad in January, prompting Iran to launch ballistic missiles at US troops in western Iraq. Apparently fearing more strikes, the US deployed Patriot anti-missile batteries and C-RAM rocket defense systems to Iraq to protect its forces, a move which US officials acknowledged to AFP could be seen by Iran as provocative.

At the same time, it reduced the coalition's presence, pulling out of half the bases it once operated from in Iraq and withdrawing hundreds of trainers indefinitely as a precautionary measure against COVID-19. As most non-US troops were trainers, that has left relatively more Americans in the remaining forces. "The coalition as we knew it no longer exists," a Western diplomat from a coalition country told AFP. — AFP

fire foreign advisors in government departments and ministries.

Meanwhile, MP Khaled Al-Otaibi yesterday called for redrawing Kuwait's foreign policy with countries that are refusing to take back their nationals who are living illegally in Kuwait. He said the government should be aware that international post-coronavirus relations will change and Kuwait's foreign policy should be part of that change, especially with countries that refuse to take back their nationals.

Kuwait has granted a one-month amnesty in April for foreign workers who have been living illegally in the country, and thousands of violators have accepted the offer. But some countries, mainly Egypt and India, appear to be reluctant to take back their nationals on coronavirus pretexts, although Kuwait is paying their airfare. Local sources however said India appears to be willing to resolve the standoff and is expected to accept its nationals early next month.

In the meantime, Kuwait continues today and tomorrow one of the biggest airlifts to repatriate up to 50,000 Kuwaitis from overseas. In the first phase, around 12,000 citizens will be repatriated. A majority of the returnees have been allowed to go home under house isolation, while more than a 100 have been sent to health ministry quarantines. Minister of State for Municipality Affairs Waleed Al-Jassem said yesterday he asked municipality staff to take the necessary steps to reopen auto-repair shops at cooperative societies to allow people to fix their vehicles.

Muslims face a Ramadan like...

Continued from Page 1

and Lebanon to the battle zones of Libya, Iraq and Yemen. Around the souks and streets of Cairo, a sprawling city of 23 million people that normally never sleeps, the coronavirus has been disastrous. "People don't want to visit shops, they are scared of the disease. It's the worst year ever," said Samir El-Khatib, who runs a stall by the historic Al-Sayeda Zainab mosque. "Compared with last year, we haven't even sold a quarter."

During Ramadan, street traders in the Egyptian capital stack their tables with dates and apricots, sweet fruits to break the fast, and the city's walls with towers of traditional lanterns known as "fawanees". But this year, authorities have imposed a night curfew and banned communal prayers and other activities, so not many people see much point in buying the lanterns. Among the few who ventured out was Nasser Salah Abdalkader, 59, a manager in the Egyptian stock market. "This year there's no Ramadan mood at all," he said. "I'd usually come to the market, and right from the start people were usually playing music, sitting around, almost living in the streets."

The Egyptian capital's narrow alleys and downtown markets are covered with traditional Ramadan decorations and brightly colored fawanees. These decorations also typically adorn restaurants and cafes, but they are all closed due to the outbreak, lending a more subdued feel to the city as the holy month approaches. Dampening the festivities before they begin, the coronavirus is also complicating another part of Ramadan, a time when both fasting and charity are seen as obligatory.

In Algeria, restaurant owners are wondering how to offer iftar to the needy when their premises are closed, while charities in Abu Dhabi that hold iftar for low-paid South Asian workers are unsure what to do with mosques now closed. Mohamed Aslam, an engineer from India who lives in a three-bedroom apartment in downtown Abu Dhabi with 14 others is unemployed because of the coronavirus. With his apartment building under quarantine after a resident tested positive, he has been relying on charity for food.

In Senegal, the plan is to continue charity albeit in a limited way. In the beachside capital of Dakar, charities that characteristically hand out "Ndogou", baguettes slathered with chocolate spread, cakes, dates, sugar and milk to those in need, will distribute them to Quranic schools rather than on the street.

Meanwhile in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, some people will be meeting loved ones remotely this year. Prabowo, who goes by one name, said he will host Eid al-Fitr, the celebration at the end of the fasting month, via the online meeting site Zoom instead of flying home. "I worry about the coronavirus," he said. "But all kinds of togetherness will be missed. No iftar together, no praying together at the mosque, and not even gossiping with friends."

Several countries' religious authorities, including Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh, have ruled that prayers during Ramadan and Eid be performed at home. "Our hearts are crying," said Ali Mulla, the muezzin at the Grand Mosque in Makkah.

"We are used to seeing the holy mosque crowded with people during the day, night, all the time... I feel pain deep inside."

In recent weeks, a stunning emptiness has enveloped the sacred Kaaba - a large black cube structure draped in gold-embroidered cloth in the Grand Mosque towards which Muslims around the world pray. The white-tiled area around the Kaaba is usually packed with tens of thousands of pilgrims. Ramadan is considered an auspicious period to perform the year-round umrah pilgrimage, which Saudi authorities suspended last month. It is likely the larger hajj pilgrimage, set for the end of July, will also be cancelled for the first time in modern history after Saudi Arabia urged Muslims to temporarily defer preparations.

The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories Muhammad Hussein has announced similar prayer restrictions during Ramadan, while also advising against the public sighting of the crescent moon, which is used to estimate the start of the holy month. The restrictions are in line with the recommendations of the World Health Organization, which has urged countries to "stop large numbers of people gathering in places associated with Ramadan activities, such as entertainment venues, markets and shops".

The restrictions have hit businesses hard, including retailers catering to the typical rush of Ramadan shoppers. This year many Muslims have repurposed their Ramadan shopping budgets to stock up on masks, gloves and other COVID-19 protective gear. "I had saved up an amount to spend on Ramadan shopping, but I spent it instead on purchasing things needed for quarantine and protection against the virus," said Younes, 51, who works at a clothing store in the Syrian capital Damascus. "This year, no feasts, no visits... I feel we are besieged by the virus wherever we go."

Sanctions-stricken Iran last week allowed some shuttered Tehran businesses to reopen, despite being one of the worst-hit countries in the Middle East, as many citizens face a bitter choice between risking infection and economic hardship. Official statistics show the disease has killed more than 5,000 people and infected over 80,000 in Iran, but the actual figures are thought to be higher. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has appealed to Iranians to pray at home during Ramadan, while urging them to "not neglect worship, invocation and humility in our loneliness".

Hardliners across the region have rejected some online suggestions by Muslims that they should be exempt from fasting this year owing to the pandemic, insisting that while social distancing was necessary, the virus did not stop them from observing the rules of Ramadan from home. "No studies of fasting and risk of COVID-19 infection have been performed," the WHO said in its list of recommendations. "Healthy people should be able to fast during this Ramadan as in previous years, while COVID-19 patients may consider religious licenses regarding breaking the fast in consultation with their doctors, as they would do with any other disease."

For many trapped in their homes in war-battered countries such as Libya, Ramadan is still a time for prayer, introspection and charity. "For me, Ramadan has come early this year. During these curfew times, it means fewer working hours, similar to Ramadan," said Karima Munir, a 54-year-old banker and mother of two in Libya. "Ramadan is always about being charitable and this year the needy are numerous, especially with the (displacement) from the war." — Agencies

2 deaths, 80 new cases; Hashem...

Continued from Page 1

MP Safa Al-Hashem yesterday called for ending what she described as "expat invasion" of state departments, saying it was time to restructure the public administration. "There is an internal invasion of all state departments by expats," Hashem said on Twitter, demanding that "this requires restructuring the composition of the public administration". Hashem's remarks come amid what appears to be a campaign to reduce the number of expatriates in the country amid the spread of the coronavirus.

During the past few weeks, MPs have officially demanded that the government should utilize the coronavirus crisis to cut by more than half the number of expatriates, who currently number 3.3 million or 70 percent of the population. The lawmakers said expats should be made equal to the 1.5 million Kuwaitis by applying quotas based on nationality. At present, the overwhelming majority of expats hail from India, Egypt, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Hashem said Kuwaitis are currently doing what expats have been doing in government jobs and "things are running in the best way possible". She also praised Kuwaitis who have volunteered at different facilities during the coronavirus crisis. She also recalled what she had proposed in the past to

Stars

Daily SuDoku

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5		4	3		8			
7			9				6	
			7	8				
	9			1				5
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					3	7	1	
	7							

hard


Yesterday's Solution

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

easy

STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)




Have you been reading about how a positive mental outlook creates a healthy body and a happy life, Aries? If so, you might just find that this attitude brings results. You're feeling strong, fit, and mentally sharp. Career interests seem to be looking up for you. A fringe benefit is that you're probably feeling especially intuitive, too. Keep doing whatever you've been doing to bring this all about, because it's working!

Libra (September 23-October 22)



If you play your cards right, Libra, you just might be able to turn what you're picking up psychically into an exalted creative effort. The emotions and images flowing into your brain might be obscure, but they're significant in some way. Whether you write, play music, dance, or paint, you could be blown away by your own work. Whatever your materials, get them out and memorialize your inspiration.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)



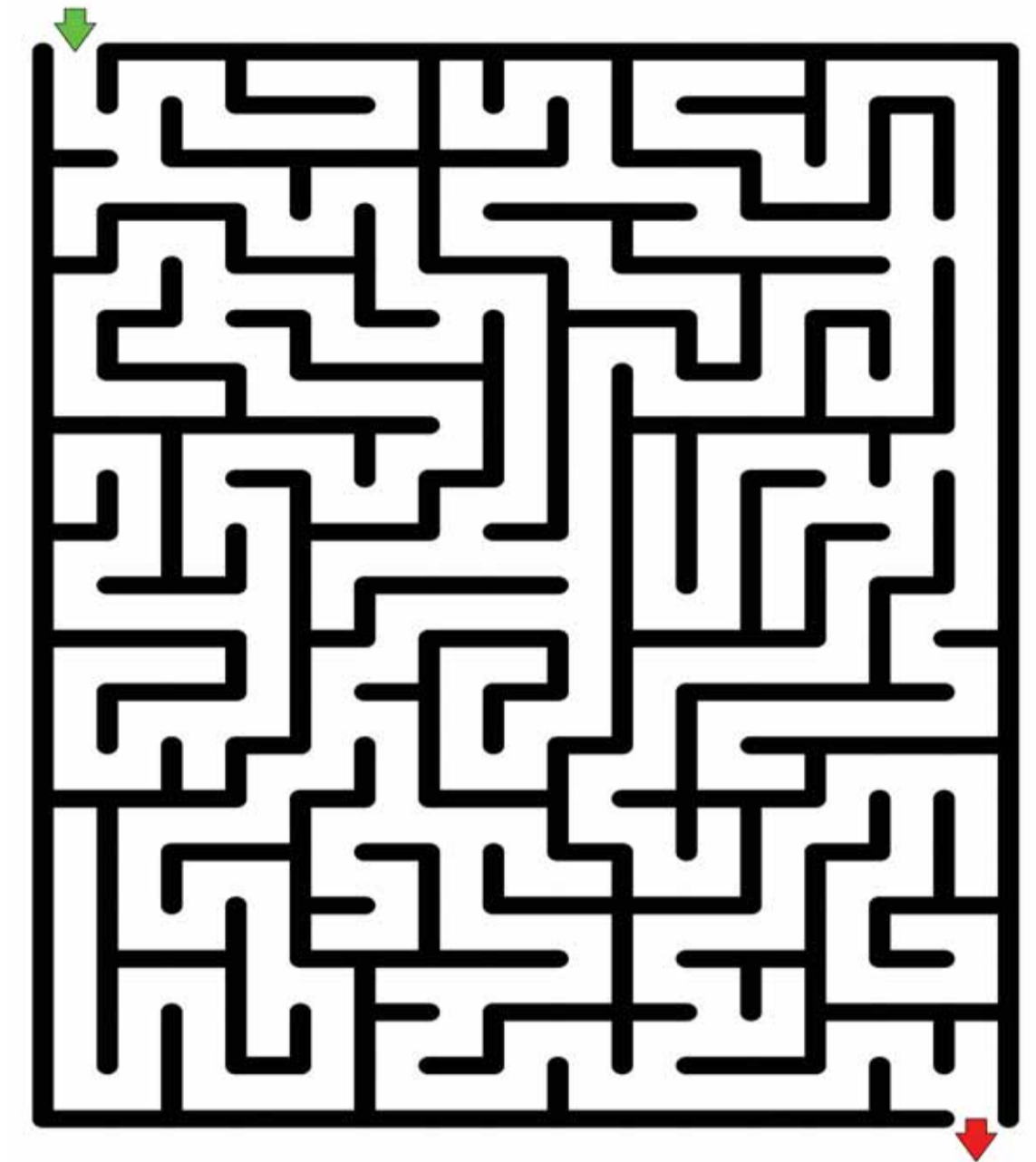
Research that you've been doing for a particular project may finally be completed, Taurus. Now you're ready to finish your work. Your mind is especially sharp right now, so this is a good time to work on any kind of project that involves communication. If you're a writer, your publishing prospects look good. Romance also should be going well. Perhaps you just became aware of a strong psychic bond between you and your beloved. Make the most of it!

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)




Expect to exchange a lot of phone calls and emails with friends today, Scorpio. Communication with others is your top priority. You have a lot of news to deliver and you'll receive a lot in return. Much of what you hear could be useful for whatever you're involved with now. The only downside is mental overload. You could feel as if your brain has spent the day running a marathon.

Find the way



Gemini (May 21-June 20)




Dreams and visions about your family paint a rosy picture of your future, Gemini. These dreams could well be prophetic, but don't jump to that conclusion without first analyzing the symbols and discerning what your dreams are trying to tell you. There could be something that you need to consider before you can move ahead toward the future you want to create.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)




Financial good fortune continues, Sagittarius, although old habits are hard to break and you might have difficulty adjusting to it. You could alternate between wanting to buy out the store and continuing to pinch pennies the way you used to. That's OK. Everybody has to make adjustments in life. Second only to falling in love, this will probably be one of the most pleasant adjustments you'll ever have to make!

Cancer (June 21-July 22)




Tonight you might decide to attend a social gathering held in your community that involves a lot of people who are into psychic or spiritual matters, Cancer. This should be an interesting experience for you, because you could not only glean a lot of fascinating information but also make some new friends. Someone could recommend a few intriguing books. Keep your eyes and ears open, and take your address book with you.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)




Are you going on a trip or possibly moving, Capricorn? Is education involved in some way? Whatever your reasons for going away, you're going to gain whatever you hope for - and more. Writing, teaching, and anything involving communication should go very well right now, including conversations with a romantic partner. Your mind is quick and retentive right now, so make the most of it.

Leo (July 23-August 22)



If you've been uncertain about the possibility of a raise in your salary, Leo, today you could finally be told for certain that it's coming. This is definitely cause for celebration. You might want to call a friend or romantic partner and propose a night on the town. Your good luck shows signs of continuing if you keep on working as hard as you have been. Now it's time to enjoy it!

Aquarius (January 20- February 18)



You tend to be intuitive by nature, Aquarius, but today you could receive psychic impressions by the dozen. You might even experience visions or hear voices. Don't worry - you aren't going crazy! You do, however, need to pay attention to these messages. They may have immense personal or even planetary significance. If you can't make sense of them, write them down. It should all be clear to you later.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)



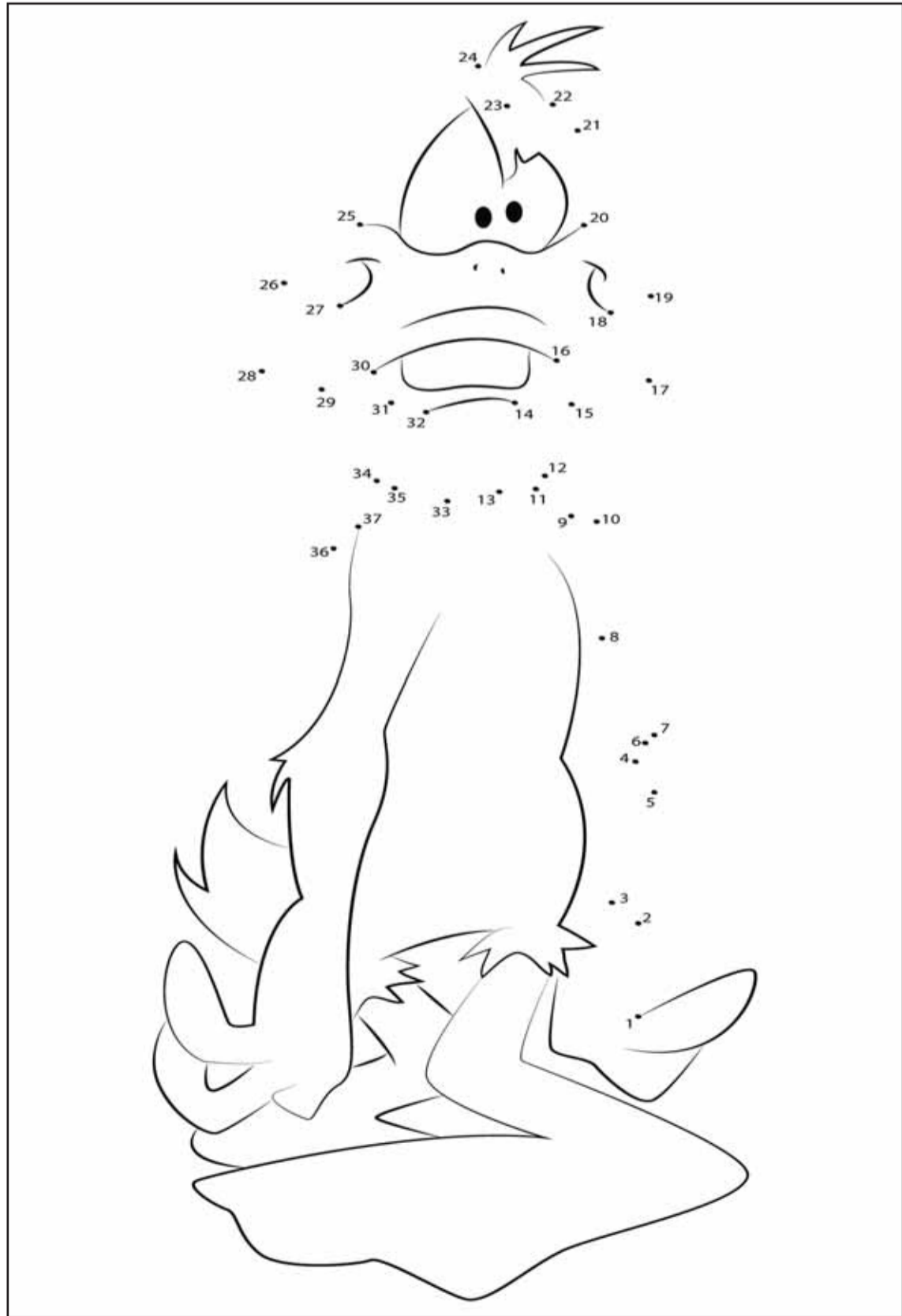
Love and romance take top priority with you today, Virgo. You might be feeling a little insecure about the stability of your current relationship, but you're wasting your energy. For now, at least, things look very promising for you and your current lover. You should be communicating well and getting along great. Use your intuition to tune in to your friend's mind, and you'll probably feel your doubts and uncertainties slip away.

Pisces (February 19-March 20)



Communication with friends and partners should be clear, open, honest, and supportive today, Pisces. Camaraderie flows freely, and affection is shown without restraint or overkill. If you're presently involved but not yet committed, a declaration of love and an expression of desire to move the relationship to the next level could be in the wind. At the very least, your lover should pay you a compliment or two!

Join the dots



Crossword

Fruits Crossword

DIRECTIONS: Fill in the crossword puzzle grid with the name of each fruit following the numbers and direction indicated. Use the word bank if you get stuck.

APPLE	KIWI
APRICOT	LEMON
AVOCADO	ORANGE
BANANAS	PEAR
BLACKBERRY	PINEAPPLE
CHERRIES	RASPBERRY
COCONUT	STRAWBERRY
GRAPEFRUIT	WATERMELON
GRAPES	

Sports

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: Mohammed Jaffar, motocross athlete, performs in Kuwait. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Playing without fans will be 'weird': Koepka

LOS ANGELES: World number three Brooks Koepka is bracing for a "weird" experience of playing golf tournaments without fans as the US PGA Tour eyes a return to competition in June.

"It's going to be so weird, man," Koepka said on the Pardon My Take sports podcast on the prospect of playing without galleries because of continuing coronavirus concerns.

"The energy that the fans bring, that's what we all live for, we all strive for," Koepka said. "You want to play coming down the stretch and have everyone cheering for you. Imagine this: you sink the putt on the last hole and no one's clapping. You're just there by yourself, and you're like 'Yes!' Just you, your caddie and just silence."

Lack of a gallery could have a more concrete effect as well, Koepka said. "Every once in a while, we just hit some foul balls and the fans kind of help you find it," he said. "I mean, guys are going to lose balls because of that."

Koepka's comments came a day before the US PGA Tour said Thursday it is targeting a June 11 restart at Colonial Country Club in Texas, the first of four tournaments that will be played without fans in attendance.

The RBC Heritage in Hilton Head, South Carolina, the Travelers Championship in Cromwell, Connecticut, and the Rocket Mortgage Classic in Detroit are scheduled to follow.

In announcing the revised schedule to a season halted after the first round of the Players Championship on March 12, tour commissioner Jay Monahan said officials would follow the guidance of local and state health authorities.

"The health and safety of all associated with the PGA Tour and our global community continues to be our number one priority, and our hope is to play a role — responsibly — in the world's return to enjoying the things we love," Monahan said. —AFP

France's Pinot can't wait to be on the road again with Tour in mind

Ineos world champion Rohan Dennis in lewd lockdown spat

PARIS: Frenchman Thibaut Pinot cannot wait to be allowed to train on the road again as part of his preparation for the Tour de France after the race was postponed amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Frenchman, third overall in 2014 and who was a top contender when he pulled out injured two days before the finish last year, has had enough of working on his home trainer.

"The home trainer is not my thing, it's got nothing to do with the sensations you usually have on the bike," Pinot, who has confined at home since March 17, told his Groupama-FDJ team website on Sunday.

"I'm still doing it to say that I train but it is not a real part of my preparations. Virtual platforms were fun for a couple of weeks but I'm over it." Pinot, however, believes that the new Tour de France dates, from Aug. 29 to Sept. 20, will suit him.

"Even if there can be hot days, it's got nothing to do with July, which pleases me. It's a disadvantage that I won't have to deal with," explained the 29-year-old, who fares better in cold than hot conditions.

With no elite racing allowed before Aug. 1, Pinot does not know in which condition he will start the Tour. "Nobody can tell if they will be at 100% on the Tour," he said.

Meanwhile, Team Ineos' Australian world cham-

panion cyclist Rohan Dennis has closed his Instagram and Twitter accounts after appearing to break Spain's lockdown law over the weekend.

The talented 29-year-old from Adelaide is the world time-trial champion but has a reputation as a loose cannon and quit team Bahrain-Merida after parking his bike by the team bus and disappearing during the last Tour de France.

This weekend he voiced his dissatisfaction on Instagram with the length of the lockdown before deleting his accounts. Screen grabs from other Instagram users showed posts such as: "Day 34 - cracked and left the house. #covid19 can suck my ass and so can #quarantine."

The accompanying photo appeared to have been taken on a country road from a car. Ineos is active in the fight against Covid-19, producing hand sanitiser and delivering it to hospitals.

Having won stages on all three Grand Tours Dennis joined Ineos for the 2020 season and would likely have been a contender for May's postponed Giro d'Italia and favourite to defend his world crown in Switzerland in September. Dennis lives in Girona, close to the Pyrenees.

Dennis is widely reported to have told on-line critics he was only being honest and asking if they would prefer him to lie. The rider famously climbed off his bike early in the 12th stage of the Tour de



Thibaut Pinot

France in 2019 with no explanation a day ahead of a time-trial he would have been favourite to win.

Dennis was at that time being primed as a Grand Tour contender who could pulverise time-trials and

defend himself on the climbs, as he did when coming second on the 2019 Tour de Suisse. Dennis won the first stage of the 2015 Tour de France and briefly wore the famed yellow jersey. —Agencies

Farah hails WWII veteran fundraiser

LONDON: British distance great Mo Farah has said his medal-winning exploits "don't mean anything" compared to the exploits of a 99-year-old British World War II veteran and coronavirus fundraiser.

Tom Moore, a captain who served in India, has raised more than £25 million (\$31 million, 29 million euros) for health workers, having initially set out to raise just £1,000 by walking 100 laps of his garden. "It's incredible — there are no real words to describe Tom," four-time Olympic gold medalist Farah told Sky Sports News on Sunday. "I've won medals for years, but that doesn't mean anything really," added Farah, the 5,000 and 10,000 metres champion at both the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Games.

"To come back to reality and realise you're making a difference for so many people who are putting their lives at risk — for someone at his age it's mind-blowing," added Farah of Moore, who has become something of a global phenomenon thanks to social media. "We get celebrated for making the country proud winning medals, but (other people) should be celebrated too for putting their lives at risk and doing the charity work."

With all major sport worldwide suspended due to the outbreak and what should have been this year's Olympics in Tokyo postponed until 2021, Farah has been involved in some fundraising efforts of his own on behalf of the UK's National Health Service amid a national lockdown in Britain. —AFP

Silverstone, Spielberg could hold F1 races

LONDON: British Grand Prix organisers said Sunday they could host two consecutive races if required in an effort to help salvage the coronavirus-hit world championship. So far nine of the 22 races have either been cancelled or postponed with the French and Belgian races tipped to join the abandoned list.

That would leave the Austrian Grand Prix on July 5 as the delayed season-opener with the British Grand Prix scheduled to follow two weeks later. Red Bull consultant

Helmut Marko told Austrian public broadcaster ORF that the Spielberg track too could host back-to-back races with the second a two-day race during the week.

He said the track manager had already proposed to the government to allow a Grand Prix without fans with chances of its approval "very high". Sports Minister Werner Kogler announced this week he was not opposed to the Spielberg race being held without a crowd.

Marko, whose team is based in Austria, said F1 organisers were working on a concept of reducing the number of those on site and how charter flights could land at an airport near Spielberg from the UK where most of the teams are based.

Marko highlighted the "unpayable

advertising effect" of Spielberg kicking off the truncated season though all those who enter Austria will have to show negative COVID-19 results to avoid quarantine.

Earlier, Silverstone managing director Stuart Pringle also said discussions were already taking place with F1 bosses over the famous British circuit hosting two world championship grands prix in succession.

"We have discussed all sorts of permutations including hosting two races over one weekend and two races over consecutive weekends," Pringle told The Guardian. "I have complete confidence in our ability to put on these events. We have a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge, we can turn that on definitely."

Rugby world must work together to secure future

PARIS: The rugby world must set aside self-interest and come together to help the sport make it through the coronavirus crisis, former All Blacks coach Steve Hansen has said. World Rugby said last week it had created a relief fund of some \$100 million to assist unions as they grapple with the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hansen said the future of the game was at risk if

unions did not look out for each other. "We have an opportunity now to start with a blank page because you have got everybody putting self-interest to the side. They know they could be gone if they don't do the right thing," Hansen told Wales Online <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/sport/rugby/rugby-news/steve-hansen-interview-im-still-18112112>.

"So it's a great opportunity to bring everybody together — north, south, individual countries — and do what it is right for the game. It's been a long time coming. "There has been a lot of self-interest and if we don't do the right thing, we could lose the game and that would be a tragedy. We have lost our way in rugby a little bit and we haven't been working well enough together."

England's Rugby Football Union has projected a loss of up to 50 million pounds (\$62.40 million) while Rugby Australia faces losses of about A\$120 million (\$76.14 million) if no more games are played this year.

World Rugby Chairman Bill Beaumont has said they were in discussions with Six Nations, SANZAAR and the International Rugby Players union to draw up plans for a return to rugby once governments and health authorities give the green light to resume competition.

The body said they were also planning for contingencies if cross-hemisphere travel is not possible, with a worst-case scenario being no more international rugby being played this year. —Reuters

Sports

Olympics organisers must be flexible if coronavirus vaccine not ready in time

Tokyo 2020 is set to run from July 23 to Aug 8 next year

TOKYO: The Tokyo Olympics next July will be a "uniquely risky" event, demanding flexibility from organisers amid the uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic, particularly if a vaccine has not been rolled out by then, medical experts say.

Japan and the International Olympic Committee made the unprecedented decision last month to delay the Games for a year, as the world battles the virus that has infected 2.3 million people and killed more than 150,000 globally. But questions persist whether the Games can go ahead 15 months from now, as a vaccine could still be at least a year away, according to the most optimistic estimates. "When we talk about bringing sports back with packed stadiums, I really think that is something we are going to have to wait for a vaccine to be able to do," said Zach Binney, an epidemiologist at Emory University in the United States.

Tokyo 2020 is set to run from July 23 to Aug. 8 next year, but organisers expect few changes to the original plan, including attendance by enthusiastic supporters. But that might be over optimistic, Binney, a specialist in aspects of athlete health, told Reuters.

"Every person that you add to a gathering adds risk," said Binney, who expects vaccine development would take 1-1/2 years from the start of the outbreak, or until late 2021, at the earliest.

"So once you get up to 50,000, 70,000, 100,000 (fans)... that is an enormous amount of risk to be taking on without a vaccine." The Olympics was "a uniquely risky event", he added, because of the threats repre-

sented by visitors streaming in from areas with a lot of infections, and the reverse flow when they return afterwards, perhaps carrying home infections.

Although more hopeful for a vaccine to be found within a year, Jason Kindrachuk, an infectious diseases expert at the University of Manitoba in Canada, flagged a risk of further delay to the Games, as vaccinating people would take time. "It is going to push the limits right up to the border of when the Olympics should be starting," said Kindrachuk, who has worked on outbreaks of Ebola and SARS. "You want to get people vaccinated not right at the point of the Olympics, but a little bit beforehand, so they build up that protective immunity."

Dr Kentaro Iwata, who drew international attention for his criticism of the Japanese government when quarantined in February on the Diamond Princess cruise ship, along with thousands of passengers, expressed pessimism over the new date. "I don't think the Olympics is likely to be held next year, if held at any time," the virologist told the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan in a teleconference. "Japan might be able to control this disease by next summer, and I wish we could, but I don't think that would happen everywhere on earth," the Kobe University professor added. In response, the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee said it was focusing purely on delivering the Games next year.

"The mission is to prepare the stage for next summer; we do not feel it is appropriate to respond to speculative questions," spokesman Masa Takaya said in an email to Reuters on Monday.



TOKYO: Visitors wearing face masks walk past the Olympic Rings monument in front of the Japan Olympic Committee headquarters near the new National Stadium.

Even if a vaccine were not ready, the organisers might still be able to hold the Games, as long as they were flexible and well prepared, Kindrachuk added.

"It is going to take some creative thinking, and hopefully some willingness from the public, to at least still partake in watching... understanding that it is just

simply not going to look like what we have seen before." Binney said the safest option would be for athletes to arrive in Tokyo four to six weeks in advance and follow rigorous isolation measures for two weeks before moving into the Olympic village to train for the remaining period.— Reuters

Scottish leagues look at reconstruction

LONDON: Hamilton chairman Les Gray believes football might not return before October as he defended the decision to end the season in the Scottish lower leagues this week.

Gray will co-chair a taskforce that will aim to reconstruct the leagues to ensure no side suffers relegation due to the shutdown caused by coronavirus.

The Scottish Premiership season has not yet been declared over, but the controversial resolution passed by the 42-member clubs of the leagues this week means the top-flight could follow suit with positions awarded on a points-per-game basis.

That would see Celtic declared champions, while as it stands Hearts would be relegated to the Championship and Partick Thistle down to League One.

"The reality is I don't think we will be playing football again before September, October," Gray told the BBC. "We need to get to the next stage and try to deliver a situation where the clubs that were disaffected are remedied. That will include Hearts and Partick Thistle. "The terms of reference will be simply to create league reconstruction through an expanded Premiership which will then obviously have (an) impact on Championship, League One, League Two and potentially the pyramid."

Gray was part of the Scottish Professional Football Leagues (SPFL) board that put forward the resolution to end the season in the lower leagues to free up much-needed funds from prize money.

Rangers have led calls for an independent investigation into the voting process by demanding SPFL chief executive Neil Doncaster and legal adviser Rod McKenzie be suspended amid claims of bullying and coercion.

Aberdeen and Hearts have added their voices to support an independent review. Gray admitted the

process had been "shambolic" with the deciding yes vote cast by Dundee. The Championship side initially intended to vote no to the resolution when clubs were asked to cast their ballot on April 10, but their vote was not received by the SPFL.

Dundee then performed a U-turn and voted the plan through five days later. "We have what's been called a shambolic voting mess and it's hard to disagree with that because of what happened in the end," said Gray.

However, Gray dismissed Rangers' claims and believes the clubs negatively affected by ending the season are in the minority. "The accusations of bullying are complete nonsense. There's loads of negotiation goes on between clubs, there's loads of chats, but the board is there purely to enact the will of the clubs and 81 percent of clubs voted in favour of this resolution.

"The silent majority have carried the day and other people are noisier and it's the clubs that voted no that are the noisiest. And I'm looking at what their motives might be." — AFP

I should have scored more goals: Rooney

LONDON: Wayne Rooney may be Manchester United and England's record goalscorer but he still believes he should have found the back of the net more often during his career, even though he was not a natural finisher.

Rooney, a teenage sensation at Everton, joined United in 2004 and went on to score 253 goals in 559 appearances during a 13-year spell for the Old Trafford club that saw the Red Devils pile up the trophies.

Rooney surpassed 1966 World Cup-winner Bobby Charlton as United's all-time leading scorer, just as he did for England with a tally of 53 goals from 120 caps. Despite those figures Rooney, writing in his Sunday Times column, insisted: "I'm going to be honest — and this might surprise you — but I'm not a natural goalscorer." The 34-year-old, now a player-coach at second-tier Derby County, added: "I was never a Gary Lineker or a Ruud van Nistelrooy; I never looked at myself that way.

"I hold the goal records for Manchester United and England and am very proud about that — yet there have been better No 9s than me. "How did I become a record-breaker if I wasn't a natural scorer? Time," Rooney explained. "I played for United for 13



Wayne Rooney

years, England for 15 years. I had time to break those records — and looking back I should have scored more." Rooney backed Harry Kane to break his England record, although he would like the Tottenham Hotspur striker "to stay high as that No 9" after seeing him drop deeper in during the past two seasons.

"I don't think it will take long for Harry Kane to claim my England record and it would be a proud moment for me," Rooney said. "I've never been a selfish

player and it would be great for England for Harry to get there. Bobby Charlton had to wait 50 years (for Rooney to break his England record) — I hope it's not so long for me.

"The United record might last longer simply because players don't stay at clubs as long as they used to. "Mind you, if (Lionel) Messi or (Cristiano) Ronaldo came to Old Trafford for a swansong they'd probably break it in three or four years." —AFP

dem, for Cricket Australia," Hazlewood told reporters on a video conference yesterday.

"We're obviously partners in the game and we've always said that. We've ridden the highs and now it's time to ride the lows. "We'll see what it comes to and we'll obviously play our part."

CA has been criticised in the media following reports over the weekend that its financial reserves had been hit by a slump in global stock markets due to the pandemic. The reserves could come under further pressure if the Twenty20 World Cup, which starts in October, and the lucrative test series against India in the home summer are forced to be abandoned due to the virus.

Former test players have already forecast swingeing cuts for cricketers' salaries as the sport faces an expected financial crisis. Hazlewood said relations between CA and the national players' union were on a far better footing than three years ago during acrimonious negotiations over a new pay deal.

"That will go a long way to go toward this episode going a lot better than last time," he said. "Hopefully it's a lot better communication and I think we'll see that in the coming weeks, coming months.

"As long as (CA) (show) a lot of transparency on all the numbers, all the players will be pretty happy with

that ... to see exactly where we're situated at the present and moving forward." CA have already delayed an announcement on national and state player contracts for men and women cricketers by a month to April 30 due to the uncertainty created by the virus.

Hazlewood said the players wanted CA to honour the new deadline. "But I guess these are strange times and anything can happen," he added.

Meanwhile, Justin Langer wanted to return home midway through Australia's Ashes tour of England in 2001 and announce his retirement after being dropped from the side due to poor form, the current national team head coach has revealed.

The left-hander, who used to bat at the number three position, was short of runs and found himself out of the side before the start of the opening test against the arch-rivals. He was recalled for the fifth and final test and asked to open the batting with fellow left-hander Matthew Hayden for the first time - the start of one of the most successful opening partnerships in the history of the game.

"Literally, the week before I opened for the first time with Haydos, I told all my family I'm getting on a plane and leaving (and) I'm going home," Langer told the ABC's One Plus One programme this week.—Reuters

Roma players to forgo remainder of season's pay

ROME: Roma players and coach Paulo Fonseca have agreed to go without pay for the rest of the season to help the club's finances during the coronavirus pandemic, the Serie A outfit said on Sunday.

The deal means the players, Fonseca and his coaching staff will give up their salaries for March, April, May and June, although Roma said that should the current campaign end up being completed "an incentive plan to be paid subject to the achievement of certain sporting objectives" had been agreed.

They had also agreed to "collectively pay the difference" to ensure that employees who have been placed on a partial unemployment scheme will receive their regular salary, the club added.

"(Captain) Edin Dzeko, all the players and Paulo have demonstrated they understand what this club stands for and we also thank them all for their superb gesture towards the employees at this club," said CEO Guido Fienga.

Italy has suffered more than 23,000 coronavirus deaths, second only to the United States, and all organised sport has been suspended since March 9. The Italian Football Federation (FIGC) has said that it wants the season to be finished come the end of Italy's COVID-19 lockdown, currently scheduled for May 4.

Earlier this month, Serie A clubs unanimously agreed to cut the salaries of players, coaches and staff, with the exception of Juventus, who had already hammered out a deal with their own players. Each club's squad will have to agree to waive between two and four months' salary.

Meanwhile, Brescia president Massimo Cellino called on Sunday the prospect of restarting the Serie A season "madness" after announcing that he had contracted the coronavirus. "(Serie A head Luigi) De Siervo called and asked me if I was prepared to play on neutral turf," Cellino told sports daily Tuttosport.

"I told him I am not prepared to play anywhere. The season has to end here, and we certainly cannot go beyond June 30. I hear talk of September or October, it's madness." Former Leeds and Cagliari chairman Cellino, 63, had revealed on Saturday that he and his daughter had contracted the virus.

"I have been in Cagliari (where he was born) for a few days, after having been in quarantine in Brescia for three weeks," Cellino told daily La Repubblica, adding that he felt "pain in my bones".

Cellino has been a frequent critic of attempts to finish the current season, which has been suspended since March 9, insisting earlier this month that he was ready for his team to forfeit games rather than play again this campaign.

The Brescia area in Lombardy has been at epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, where over 23,000 people have died since the start of the outbreak — second only to the United States.

Earlier this month Brescia players agreed to a pay cut to help the club through the suspension. — AFP

Australia's Hazlewood says players willing to take pay cuts

MELBOURNE: Australia's cricketers are willing to take pay cuts if it will help keep the game afloat during the coronavirus shutdown but the country's board must be transparent about its finances, pacesman Josh Hazlewood has said.

Cricket Australia (CA) said last week it planned to furlough almost 80% of its staff, putting them on 20% pay until June 30 when it is hoped more information will be available on how long government curbs to control the new coronavirus will last.

Hazlewood said he was taken aback by news of the financial pressures CA was under situation, given that the Australian cricket season was all but over when the national lockdown brought sport to a halt in March.

"It probably took me a little bit by surprise just due to the fact that it's happened at a perfect time, this pan-

18 France's Pinot can't wait to be on the road again with Tour in mind



19 'I should have scored more goals': Rooney



19 Olympics organisers must be flexible if coronavirus vaccine not ready in time



Chinese Super League to start by July

Evergrande to build two more 80,000-seat stadiums in China



GUANGZHOU: A design image is pictured on a board during the ground-breaking ceremony of Guangzhou Evergrande's new stadium in Guangzhou in China's southern Guangdong province on April 16, 2020. Chinese champions Guangzhou Evergrande began building a new stadium costing 12 billion yuan (1.7 billion USD) and boasting a 100,000 capacity — one of the world's largest arenas. — AFP

SHANGHAI: The coronavirus-delayed Chinese Super League (CSL) season is scheduled to begin in late June or early July, a club chairman says. Suspended leagues across the world, including in Europe, will be watching the CSL with interest as an indicator of the challenges they face in relaunching their own competitions. The campaign was supposed to start on February 22 but was indefinitely postponed by the pandemic, which emerged in China in December before spreading worldwide. "Based on the assessment of the current situation, the new season will start at the end of June or beginning of July," said Guangzhou R&F chairman Huang Shenghua, according to state media.

Huang said that the season will be able to take place in full with each team playing the allotted 30

matches. The media reports did not indicate whether a formal announcement was expected from the Chinese Football Association.

China says that it has curbed coronavirus at home but is now concerned about a second wave of imported infections from people entering the country from overseas.

Marouane Fellaini, the former Manchester United midfielder, is the only known coronavirus case in the CSL. He was released from hospital last week and is under further observation, although he was not seriously ill.



Relaunching their own competitions

their academies.

The Nadal Academy in Mallorca said it was considering becoming "a campus where elite players can reside, train and compete between themselves in matches that will be televised so that fans around the world can enjoy them."

Mouratoglou released a statement unveiling a planned "league" of 50 matches at his academy near Nice in the south of France and talking of "millions of US dollars in prize money".

Mouratoglou said he was planning 10 closed-door matches to be broadcast live on each of five weekends under the title "Ultimate Tennis Showdown". The competition will start on the weekend of May 16 with a match between world number 10 David Goffin and 20-year-old Australian Alexei Popyrin.

Meanwhile, Novak Djokovic faces a dilemma if it becomes compulsory for players to get vaccinated before they can begin competing once the tennis season resumes following the hiatus created by the coronavirus pandemic, the world number one said on Sunday. "Personally I am opposed to vaccination and I wouldn't want to be forced by someone to take a vaccine in order to be able to travel," Djokovic said in a live Facebook chat with several fellow Serbian athletes. "But if it becomes compulsory, what will happen? I will have to make a decision. I have my own thoughts about the matter and whether those thoughts will change at some point, I don't know."

"Hypothetically, if the season was to resume in July, August or September, though unlikely, I understand that a vaccine will become a requirement

Meanwhile, the wealthy owners of Chinese champions Guangzhou Evergrande will build two stadiums with capacities of 80,000 each, in addition to the club's new 100,000-seat home. Chinese Super League (CSL) clubs are building or renovating a clutch of stadiums with the country set to host the newly expanded 2021 FIFA Club World Cup and AFC Asian Cup in 2023.

But the rush on new arenas will also heighten speculation that China is gearing up for a bid to host the World Cup, possibly in 2030. Evergrande Group, a major property developer, has asked

fans to pick their favourite designs for two more new stadiums.

"Evergrande plans to build two additional 80,000-seat football fields and invites everyone to recommend two of the six preliminary plans," Guangzhou Evergrande's owners said on social media. The statement did not give any further information such as where in China or when the stadiums would be built. CSL champions Guangzhou Evergrande, coached by Italian World Cup winner Fabio Cannavaro, began work Thursday on their eye-catching new home.

Costing 12 billion yuan (\$1.7 billion), it will be bigger than Barcelona's famous Camp Nou and is scheduled for completion by the end of 2022. Evergrande Group's founder is the billionaire Xu Jiayin, one of the richest men in China. — AFP

Tennis warned of 'elevated risk of corruption'

PARIS: Tennis players taking part in private tournaments while the sport is in lockdown have been warned that match-fixers remain a threat.

ATP and WTA events have been on ice for over a month and will not resume until July 13 at the earliest. In the meantime, exhibition matches, as well as virtual tennis tournaments, have been suggested as a means to sharpen competitive edges and boost bank balances. "The suspension of professional tennis is an uncertain and challenging time for the tennis community," said a statement from corruption watchdog, the Tennis Integrity Unit.

"Some privately organised exhibition matches, tournaments and even eSports events will start to take place where and when local government restrictions allow.

"We understand that these will be attractive opportunities to many of you eager to play and to earn an income." While the playing opportunities created are welcomed, we must advise you that there may be an elevated risk of corruption and corrupt approaches in some of these environments."

Rafael Nadal and Patrick Mouratoglou, the coach of Serena Williams, both say that they plan events at

straight after we are out of strict quarantine and there is no vaccine yet." Last month, former world number one Amelie Mauresmo said the rest of the 2020 tennis season might be wiped out, saying that action should not resume before players can get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus.

"International circuit = players of all nationalities plus management, spectators and people from the 4 corners of the world who bring these events to life. No vaccine = no tennis," the two-time grand slam winner said in a widely shared tweet.

Medical experts have said that vaccines against the respiratory virus would not be ready until next year, raising doubts whether any further tennis tournaments can be contested this year.

This year's Wimbledon championships have been cancelled for the first time since World War II while the French Open, originally due to be held from May 24-June 7, was rescheduled for Sept. 20 - Oct. 4, shortly after the end of the US Open.

Djokovic made a flying start to the 2020 season, winning the Australian Open in January for his 17th grand slam title and stretched his winning run to 18 matches before the pandemic brought sports events across the world to a halt.

The 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the Euro 2020 soccer championship were among the events postponed until next year as the pandemic has caused 165,000 deaths worldwide. So far the governing bodies of tennis have suspended all tournaments until July 13. In addition, the women's Rogers Cup in Montreal, which had been due to be held in August, will also not take place this year. — Agencies



Novak Djokovic