



Call to halt loans, recruitment from states refusing returnees

2 deaths, 168 new virus cases • Report on all virus-related contracts sought

No last goodbye for Gulf workers lost to pandemic

DUBAI: The body of the Indian migrant who died from coronavirus far from home was kept inside the ambulance in front of the crematorium in case a friend came by for a last goodbye. But nearly an hour later no one had appeared, and the workers in protective suits had to carry out their grim task. In silence, the four men carefully moved the body, wrapped in a white plastic bag, to a furnace where it was reduced to ashes that were placed in a silver box.

Millions of foreigners work in the United Arab Emirates and across the other wealthy Gulf nations, providing the backbone of the workforce in hospitals and banks, as well as on construction sites and in factories. Many have spent decades toiling to provide for their families, with the hope of returning one day to open a business or build a house.

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By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Abdulkarim Al-Kandari yesterday called on the government to order Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic and Social Development to stop giving loans to countries that have refused to take back their workers who have been living illegally in the country. Kandari, who heads the National Assembly's foreign relations panel, said the government should adopt a tougher policy by also threatening to stop recruiting workers from these countries. At least Egypt and India have refused to allow the return of thousands of their workers living illegally in Kuwait but pardoned by the Kuwaiti government, which also will pay their airfare.

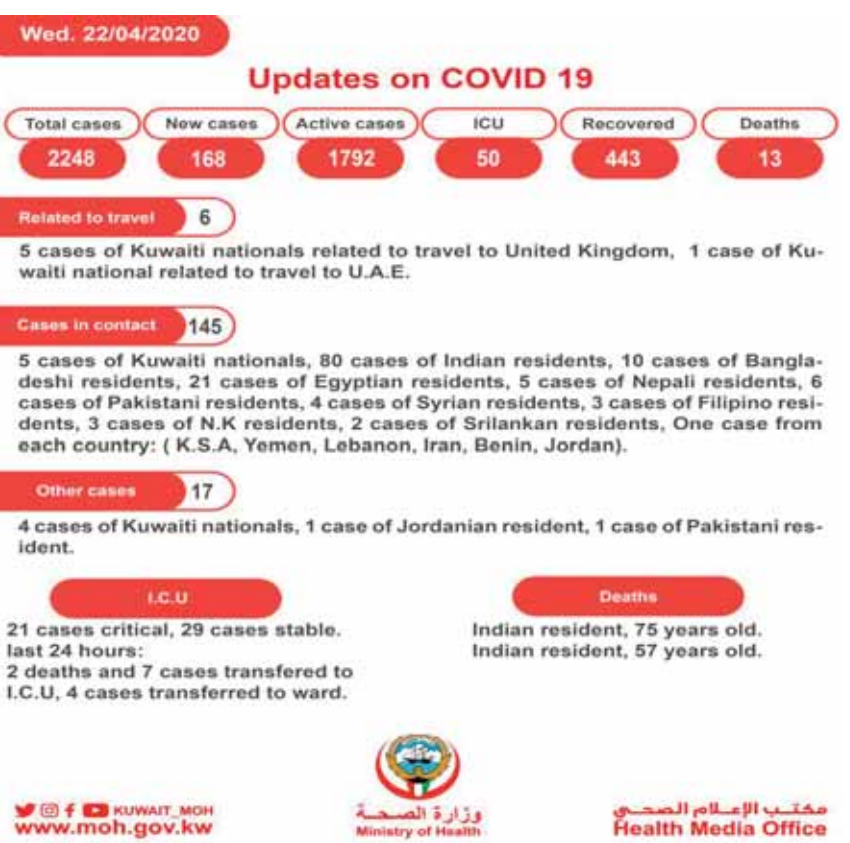
The health ministry yesterday reported 168 new coronavirus infections in the last 24 hours, bringing the tally to 2,248 cases, while two deaths were reported. The total numbers of deaths have reached 13. During a daily briefing, Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said 50 patients are in intensive care, 21 of them in crit-

ical condition. Those currently receiving treatment at hospitals have reached 1,792 patients, he added. The new death cases are of two Indians aged 75 and 57 - both were receiving treatment in intensive care units. Earlier yesterday, Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced the recovery of 31 patients, taking total recoveries to 443.

The Assembly budgets committee has asked the Audit Bureau to prepare a comprehensive report on all expenditures made with relation to the coronavirus, member of the panel MIP Riyadh Al-Adasani said. He said the panel requested that the report should include details about every contract approved by the bureau and the total costs of the contracts, Adasani said.

It also asked for the bureau's technical opinion if each contract is related to the coronavirus and it is necessary to carry out government activities amid a major shutdown of businesses, or if some of the contracts could have been delayed until after

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Local

Kuwait Amir congratulates citizens, residents on near advent of Ramadan

Kuwaiti, Bahraini leaders exchange Ramadan greetings, discuss COVID-19 measures

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah expressed yesterday his sincere greetings to citizens and expatriates on the near advent of the holy month of Ramadan, said the Amiri Diwan in a statement. The Amiri diwan added that His Highness the Amir would not be able to receive Ramadan well-wishers this year in line with the health guidelines set to counter the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The Diwan expressed wishes of welfare and prosperity to the leadership and people of Kuwait as well as the Arab and Muslim countries.

Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Tuesday a call from Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa and exchanged greetings on advent of holy month of Ramadan. His Highness the Amir and King Hamad also exchanged views over the preventive measures in the two countries against the spread of coronavirus. His Highness the Amir thanked King Hamad for his phone call, which reflected deep-rooted relationship between the two countries, wishing the Kingdom progress and prosperity under the leadership of the Monarch. His Highness the Amir also received a call from Bahraini Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa and exchanged greetings on advent of Ramadan. Prince Khalifa wished His Highness the Amir enjoyed good health. His Highness the Amir thanked Prince Khalifa for his phone call which mirrored the deep relations between the two countries, wishing Bahrain prosperity and development under leadership of King Hamad.

In the meantime, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received a call from Bahraini Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa and exchanged greetings on advent of holy month of Ramadan. His



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

Highness the Crown Prince and Prince Khalifa also exchanged views over the preventive measures in the two countries against the spread of coronavirus. Prince Khalifa prayed to

Allah the Almighty to eliminate this pandemic on the State of Kuwait and the rest of the world. His Highness the Crown Prince thanked Prince Khalifa for his phone call, and prayed to Allah the Almighty to bestow blessing upon Prince Khalifa and the people of Bahrain. His

Highness the Crown Prince prayed to Allah to exterminate this pandemic on the Kingdom of Bahrain and its people, as well as the rest of the world. — KUNA

Amir won't receive well-wishers



Speakers partake in IPU meetings via video conference

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem participated, through a video conference on Tuesday, in the third preparatory committee meeting, for the fifth conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), scheduled to be held next August in Vienna, Austria. Ghanem participated as a representative of the Arab Parliamentary Group, as he had previously participated in the last two meetings in Geneva. During the meeting, Ghanem made several remarks in which he affirmed the position of the Arab group towards many of the issues presented at the meeting, including climate change, refugee issues, and demographic changes in many countries around the world, in addition to discussing the developments of coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, which was later included in the meeting's agenda. Parliamentarians from more than 14 countries representing the geopolitical groups in the world participated in the meeting, in addition to the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Gabriela Cuevas Barron and the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Martin Chungong.

Meanwhile, Finance Ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries discussed Tuesday preemptive and preventive measures they were implementing to address ramification of the coronavirus. The finance ministers, in a virtual meeting, discussed means of boosting confidence in economies of the six GCC countries and achieving sustainability in their finances. Saudi Press Agency reported. The ministers also discussed recommendations by their committees.

In the meantime, UN Secretary-General representative and the Resident Coordinator in Kuwait, Dr Tariq Al-Sheikh, and the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development, Dr Khaled Mahdi, discussed online the continuous joint cooperation and global development opportunities and challenges related to the coronavirus spread. Both sides discussed the priorities for planning, future forecasting and different



KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali-Ghanem participates, through a video conference, in the third preparatory committee meeting for the fifth conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. — KUNA

scenarios to reduce the epidemic effects on the economy, society, demography and dealing with the crisis as an opportunity for Kuwait to introduce and amend policies, said the representative office in a press release Tuesday.

The statement noted that the meeting witnessed a presentation of a cooperation draft proposal between the UN and the Kuwaiti government in a risk management plan and a rapid development response in the areas of community health awareness, safety, economic and social resilience and education. The two sides stressed the continuous cooperation in studying the risk management resulting from the slowdown in achieving the sustainable development goals in view of the reality of this pandemic, it added.

Furthermore, the statement quoted Dr Tariq as saying that the UN with all its institutions undertakes to provide and submit recommendations, plans, response programs, international guides and directives for countries to cooperate in dealing with the current emergency and its effects on various sectors in Kuwait and the rest of the countries. Dr Khaled emphasized that the current policies that resulted from the current situation and in which focus will be demonstrated showed that the post-COVID-19 world will be completely different and that the interests will focus on health problems, volunteer management, online education, major economic issues and food security. — KUNA

Local spotlight

Fasting helps



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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Many people are not aware of the significant health benefits of fasting, which is really an effective healthy practice when it is done the right way. Fasting helps the body to get rid of toxins, reduce blood sugar levels and lowers fat storage, while at the same time helps the immune system. As for removing toxins, we all know that foods prepared in advance contain many additives and preservatives which turn into toxins inside the body, and most of them are stored in body fat. Fasting prompts the body to burn such fats, and this in turn helps in expelling the toxins through the liver and kidneys, in addition to other organs.

We should remember that our digestive system takes a break while fasting. The natural physiological functions continue, particularly the secretion of digestive juices at a lower rate, and this helps keep the fluid balance in the body, while food digestion takes place at a steady rate, and this produces energy at a gradual rate. Yet fasting does not prevent secretion of gastric acids, so patients with ulcers must be careful when fasting.

There are studies that show fasting helps in some medical issues, including allergies. Fasting increases the breakup of glucose and energy production, which in turn reduces the production of insulin, giving the pancreas a break. Blood pressure or hypertension can be reduced by fasting, as it helps the reduction of arteriosclerosis. Fats are burned and glucose is broken to produce the necessary energy for the body. The metabolism rates also slow down, reducing hormones such as adrenaline, and this in turn helps in lowering hypertension.

When one follows a balanced diet between fasting periods, it helps the immune system. Eating fruits helps increase the nutritional content of vitamins A and E - both are excellent antioxidants and augment the immune system. It is good to remember that fasting can suppress the appetite for ready-made foods, and instead of that fasting increases the desire to eat healthy food. Finally, regardless of the mentioned benefits, one should seek medical advice any time before starting the fast in case of any medical condition.

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 2,248 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), in addition to 13 deaths. With the exception of 50 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, 443 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, the ministry said. There are 1,792 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, which was later extended to start from 4:00 pm until 8:00 am during Ramadan, while allowing restaurants and food stores to make home deliveries from 5:00 pm until 1:00 am. The government also locked down Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh in a bid to contain the spread of the virus and enable health workers to test inhabitants. Earlier, the government decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The government also allowed supermarkets, restaurants and shops to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are lines, the distance must be at least one meter between people. The Ministry of Commerce launched a website (www.moci.shop) to enable people to book appointments to shop at co-operative societies in their areas. The Public Authority for Industry also announced that companies can apply to evacuate their workers from Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula. To do so, they must fill a 'workers evacuation form' available on www.pai.gov.kw, and send the form via email to: Jasiri@moh.gov.kw.

Precautions

Kuwait halted all commercial flights until further notice, and has sent special flights to repatriate Kuwaitis back home from countries affected with the virus' spread. All arrivals to Kuwait from all countries are to be placed under compulsory institutional quarantine for 14 days, during which the person is monitored, and prescribed health procedures are applied, the health ministry said. Meanwhile, the Cabinet announced on April 9 the operation of all airline flights for expats who are wishing to return back to their countries. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to May 28, with work resuming on May 31, 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-Aslamaya 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-Sahli: 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

Indians fret about delays in going home as flights remain suspended

More than 5,000 Indian workers clear amnesty papers, 8,000 more to apply

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: Hundreds of Indian expats who availed the amnesty offered by the Kuwait government are worried and waiting for a green signal from the Indian government for their repatriation to their home country, as flight services to the country remain suspended over the coronavirus lockdown. The Kuwait government, in an unprecedented initiative, has offered free air passage to all illegal residents to their home countries as part of the amnesty program.

However, Indian workers will remain sheltered indefinitely in various repatriation centers while their counterparts from other countries fly home. The Indian government has made it clear last week that it would not allow commercial flights to operate until it is fully confident that the COVID-19 pandemic is under control. The country is under lockdown until May 3.

"We are not sure when we will be able to go home, because there are no flights to India now," said Abdulkareem, an Indian worker from Telangana state who applied for an emergency certificate (EC) with the Indian Embassy. India's aviation regulator has told airlines not to take bookings, as the government has not yet decided when to recommence flights after the 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.



KUWAIT: In this file photo, Indian nationals wait inside a school in Farwaniya to apply for an amnesty announced by Kuwaiti authorities for residency violators. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Unprecedented initiative

The amnesty program for people in the country without residency permits continues till April 30, 2020 and allows violators to leave Kuwait without paying any fines. According to the Indian Embassy,

applications after April 26 in view of the surge in the number of amnesty-seekers.

"We are waiting for a green signal from the civil aviation authority. However, the DGCA is not expected to take a decision before May 3. It will review the prevailing situation when the lockdown ends and take a decision on resuming flights," an Indian Embassy official told Kuwait Times. "When flights resume, our priority will be to send home around 250 Indians who are already in deportation centers in Kuwait," the official added.

As part of the amnesty program, the Kuwait government has announced that it would forgo all residency-related penalties of the amnesty-seekers and offered a 30 percent waiver on all other debts or fines incurred by them. "The government is keen on making this amnesty program a big success. And it is for the first time that a Gulf country is offering free air passage to residency violators to leave the country. The government has offered special flights to various countries to repatriate foreign expat workers. It is an unprecedented initiative and a kind gesture," said Ajith Kumar, Kerala Pravasi Welfare Board Director.

Sympathetic approach

India's Minister of State for External Affairs V

Muraleedhan told Indian media last week that the repatriation of non-resident Indians (NRIs) from Gulf countries would not happen anytime now as the country is under lockdown. "We hope that our government in India would take a more sympathetic approach in this case and open its airspace as soon as possible," said Ajithkumar. Other countries like the Philippines, Bangladesh, Egypt and Pakistan have begun repatriation of their nationals. The Philippines has already brought home around 2,000 workers who obtained the amnesty in Kuwait.

Meanwhile, the alarming rise in coronavirus cases among Indians in Kuwait has unnerved community members. As of Tuesday, more than 1,200 Indians have tested positive for COVID-19 in Kuwait. "People living in labor camps and laborers working in construction sites must become more serious about the epidemic. They must strictly adhere to the COVID-19 containment guidelines issued by the government," Kuwait Kerala Muslim Cultural Center (KKMCC) President Sharafuddeen Kanneth said. KKMCC, KALA Kuwait, Overseas Indian Cultural Congress, KKMA and other Indian cultural associations have opened help desks and their volunteers are providing assistance to amnesty seekers in processing their papers.

Wellbeing Amidst Pandemic

Managing overall health

By Sadie Hussain

Do your best to view this disruption as a new, if abnormal, experience that may reap some benefits if you just take the time to adapt. Eat healthier food that strengthen the immune system and are rich in vitamins, including fruits, yogurt and nuts. The immune system is weakened by smoking, alcohol and poor nutrition, including processed foods and those high in sugar. Be more aware of what you are delivering to your body. By maintaining routines where possible or creating new daily routines, you will benefit all aspects of your life. In fact, a healthy routine is more so important during this time to ensure that you safeguard your health.

Decades of research have highlighted the importance of that. Not only do routines help alleviate mental fatigue and regulate circadian health, but they also contribute to productivity. Establishing a solid routine, especially in the morning, is key to your success in working remotely. Try to maintain your regular sleep patterns, although some may have difficulty in setting a routine absent of the pressures to get out of bed. It is certainly achievable by ensuring that you sleep at reasonable times and wake up at the same time every day. You may spend time doing an activity before you start work i.e. exercise (morning workouts increase productivity), have a healthy breakfast, catch up with friends and family on the phone or spend some extra time with children or loved ones. By doing so, you are also giving yourself time to map out your day so that when you sit down on your laptops, computers or smartphones to start your work day, you are operating at peak productivity. Try and take regular breaks to stretch, hydrate and eat.

Remote working has altered our lives both in positive and negative ways, though the option of remote or flexible working has always been discussed by corporates worldwide, the deterrent has always been the level of responsibility exercised by individuals. Take this time to be an example of a responsible employee, this will only produce positive bi-products such as efficiency and trust. Although some of us may have erratic work schedules, try your best to differentiate weekends in order to preserve some routine and offer yourself some downtime.

When you are not working, be mindful of your cognitive health: take time to try new relaxation activities (aside from watching television) such as reading, writing or a hobby. Find new knowledge in order to stimulate your minds and better yourselves (whether professional or personal). When you take time for yourself and give your body the food, rest, and activity it needs, you will have more energy to meet the demands of daily life. Bringing more balance to your daily routine will also help you be more resilient. With Ramadan around the corner, it is imperative that we all take steps to manage our physical and mental wellbeing and support those around us that are struggling.

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

India under lockdown until May 3

5,000 residency violators with valid passports have cleared the amnesty papers so far. They have been moved to repatriation centers, while around 8,000 people without valid passports have applied for emergency certificates (ECs) from the embassy.

According to official estimates, there were around 24,400 illegal Indian residents in Kuwait as of Feb 28, 2020. Although the days allocated to Indian residency violators for processing their applications ended on April 20, the Indian Embassy is seeking more time for Indian workers to submit ap-

Egyptian Consul in Kuwait to follow Egyptians' deportation

KUWAIT: A Jazeera Airways plane repatriating Kuwaiti citizens from Cairo Tuesday also carried Egypt's Consul General in the State of Kuwait who would follow up deportation of Egyptians violating residency law, Kuwait Ambassador to Egypt said. Mohammad Al-Thuwaikh explained that the deportation of Egyptian nationals were at the request of the Egyptian authorities. He was reacting to social media reports that the Jazeera Airways plane carried non-Kuwaiti passengers.

Speaking to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), Thuwaikh said all passengers on board the Jazeera Airways were Kuwaiti citizens but the Egyptian Consul

who "returned to carry out his duties in taking care of affairs of our Egyptians brothers in the country including following up deportation of violators at the request of the Egyptian authorities." He called on those circulating these false reports to refrain from doing so.

In the meantime, there are around 6,000 Egyptian teachers in Kuwait who are hoping to return to Egypt, and have appealed to Egyptian authorities to open airports and receive those who wish to return. Al-Sayed Al-Malki, the teachers' representative, told Al-Qabas daily that they made a survey to count the people who wish to return to Egypt, where 6,000 teachers showed

their desire to go back.

He added that Kuwait's Ministry of Education suspended schools until August, giving them the green light to travel without a permit, and all they

need is the Egyptian authority's permission. Teachers assured that they are willing to bear the expenses of their travel, and even the expenses of governmental quarantine in Egypt.

PACI launches digital ID cards

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) has launched a new application, "ID Mobile Kuwait," via which citizens and residents can obtain a digital civil identification card that can be used in various government and non-government transactions. PACI Assistant Director General MUSAED AL-ASOUSI said yesterday that the application was launched in line with the Ministerial Resolution 1/2020, issued by Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Interior and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and PACI Chairman ANAS AL-SALEH. The authority has also launched another service, "Authentication," for safe access to electronic services and transactions, in addition to e-signature site, "Signature Digital," for electronic documents for public and private authorities.

Asousi added that the application could be effected by self-service or by referring to PACI's bureaus. However, due to current extraordinary circumstances in the country, effecting the application with these methods is halted, thus PACI has developed another method via smart phones. The application for now solely provides issuing a digital ID card as a re-

placement to the material one. Digital authentication will be available soon through smart phones. Asousi added that the application is a digital alternative to the tangible ID card, amid current circumstances related to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) where PACI could not distribute IDs through conventional ways. The digital application is useful for those who cannot get their physical IDs, kept in automated delivery machines, before work was halted on March 12, or for those whose cards expired during the time since then.

Asousi noted further that priority of giving the digital service would be for those whose IDs expired and have new ones kept in the delivery automated machines or those who applied for renewing the ID via PACI website. Exemptions for now includes newly born, those who filed for registration first time, applicants for cards who lost theirs and domestic workers. Full information about the application are available on PACI's website: www.paci.gov.kw. Technical support is available by emailing the website, "MIDSupport@paci.gov.kw", or by sending a WhatsApp message via number: 50008018. — KUNA

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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Local

Kuwaitis and the confrontation of epidemic outbreaks

By Dr Ayed Ateeq Al-Juraid, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History

KUWAIT: In the process of time, many countries all over the world, including Kuwait, were hit by pandemics in the 19th century and the mid of the 20th century. These epidemics killed millions of people, such as the plague which broke out in 1831. A Kuwaiti historian named Abdul Aziz Al-Rashid said, "Kuwait was hit by a nefarious plague that killed many of its people, which turned the country into a ghost town, except the Kuwaiti travellers who did not come back until the plague disappeared. They found out that their wives and children were perished by the plague, so they had to get married again from neighboring countries, such as Al-Zubair, Najid and the like. And by doing this, they saved Kuwait from extinction."

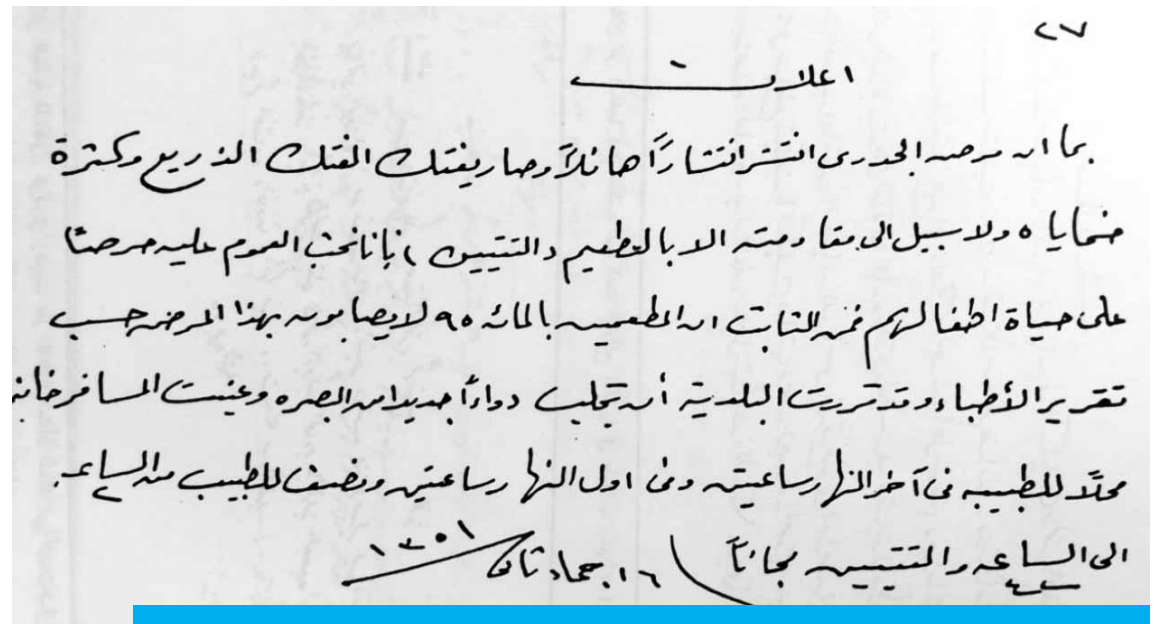
At that period until 1946, Kuwait did not have the sufficient financial resources to establish hospitals, provide the specialized nursing body as well as treatments.

Dr Eleanor Calverley, from the American Mission Hospital which started in 1910, reported about the epidemics which Kuwait witnessed in the first half of the 20th century, saying, "The diseases found in Kuwait were eye infections, children enteritis and trachoma that caused blindness. I could do simple operations that alleviated the diseases. Other diseases like tuberculosis and the smallpox were dangerously spreading and killed thousands of people especially children, whom had blindness, the thing that made Dr Mylrae a physician in the British Commission, who felt alarmed, to ask for doubling and exerting efforts to combat smallpox. So they asked for importing vaccines. People did not accept being vaccinated despite all trials." In 1918, Kuwait was hit by flu that overwhelmed the world because of poverty and lack of warmth in winter. Measles also was spread the same as in America and caused the death of many children. In addition, the whooping cough, chicken pox, rubella were known diseases as well as dengue that spread in Kuwait once, but people could survive it. In fact, those epidemics could kill a lot of people in Kuwait, especially the flu in 1918. This disease could kill 50 million to 100 million people all over the world, which means fifth percent of the population of the world.

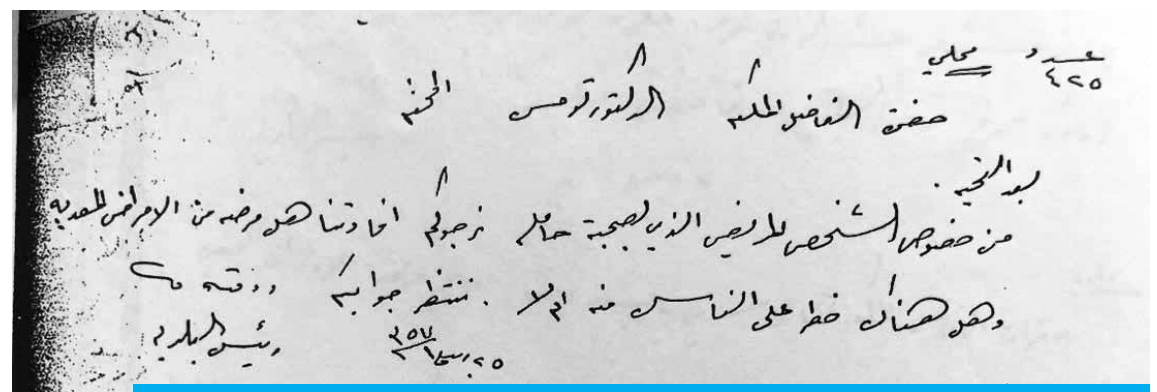
When it came to health services, Kuwait depended only on the dispensary of the British Accreditation Foundation (BAF) in 1904, set up by S G Knox, the British Accreditor. Physicians were British and Indians who treated only BAF employees, then later on allowed treating Kuwaitis provided that they do not exceed seventy. Kuwaitis could, despite the lack of their resources and exporting oil in 1946, treat and nurse their patients. They volunteered for their country. Some treated burns, wounds, fractures, poisons, eye infections and smallpox. Most medicines were herbal provided by herbalists. Some of them were Sheikh Musaid Abdullah Al-Azmi, who graduated from Al-Azhar University in 1881. While studying in Egypt, he learned how to vaccinate people against smallpox. After graduation, he went to India to buy the necessary materials for vaccines. He came back to Kuwait in 1315 H through Yemen, Muscat, Ras Al-Khaimah, Dubai and Ehsa. He made his house his clinic for treating people, taking a 'Qran' which equaled twenty fils for each vaccine. Other Kuwaiti curer was Sailor Ahmed Muhammed Al-Ghanem who was famous for treating bone fractures.

There are many Kuwaiti reformers who, through their charities, could provide health services in 1913. Farhan Al-Khudhair, founder of the Arabic Charity, provided health services. He received full support. In the document of establishment dated Oct 13, 1913, the aims of the charity were mentioned as follows: "And that Ahmed, Farhan and Ali, sons of Fahd Al-Khudhair, have dedicated Waqf as a building to establish the Arabic Charity Society, located in Saud Headquarter as a hospital for patients, clinic and a meeting place." It was a two-storey building. The first floor was for mentoring, students and the library. The second one was for the physicians and the drug store.

In addition to the personal efforts of Khudhair, many volunteers helped physician in the hospital such as wound's dressing. They were Musaid Al-Kulaib, Abdul Hamid Al Sania and Sultan Al-Kulaib who urged young men to kill their free time by helping physicians nursing patients. Many benevolent people donated to the charity including the late Amir Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah who donated 5,000 rupees and medications as well. Despite the short peri-



A Kuwait Municipality announcement dating back to 1932 urging the public to vaccinate against smallpox.



A letter sent from Kuwait Municipality to the American Mission Hospital in 1938, inquiring about a patient and how to prevent infection.

od of the charity hospital's work, it played a vital role in helping people. In the 1930s, Kuwait suffered many spreading diseases. Dr Mary Bruins Allison reported: "I have witnessed the death of many women due to viral infections." In 1932, the smallpox killed thousands of children, so Dr Mylrae advised to use vaccines.

The Kuwaiti Town Council took a decision to bring the protective antidote, increase the social awareness to have vaccines through making posters and appointing physicians to give free vaccination. In the mid-1930s, Kuwait was exposed to many diseases. One of the main problems was the inflammation of eyes because of trachoma. Others were the liver diseases, pains of dengue, toothaches, dermal infections, cough, tuberculosis and unknown fevers. In addition, there were problems of malnutrition, pregnancy, infertility and heart diseases.

In 1939, The Kuwait Department of Health set up the first small government clinic, located in the internal Souk (Market) in Al-Ameer Street, the pharmacy of Wanais, that belonged to Muhammed Boudai then belonged to Hamad Al-Humaidi. Two months later, the government bought it. At that time, it took its official structural system when Mohammed Boudai was its director, Khalid Abdul Latif Al-Duhaim was the clerk and Mohammed Al-Otaibi was the supervisor.

In August of the same year, Dr Omar Salama, and the pharmacist Mohammed Salama were appointed in the clinic. And because the place was not big enough, the government hired the Diwaniya of Haj Ismail Maarifi in Sharq to be the Health Department and Al-Ameri Clinic. Dr Yehya Al-Hadidi, a Syrian physician, mentioned that in the beginning of his work in 1940, he asked for more volunteers to help work in the Health Department, from whom were Al-Duhaim, Ali Amman and Aisha Jamma. He also mentioned that work started at sunrise and ended at sunset. They divided the diwaniya into many divisions to facilitate treatment because of many patients. They also did not have electricity at the time.

The first health group was formed because

only the hospital of the missionary and the British Clinic provided health services. Although they were medically inexperienced, yet they could help physicians Salama and Hadidi. They include Khalid Abdul Latif who worked with his father the founder of the first pharmacy in Kuwait in 1927, Mohammed Boudai who had a pharmacy, Ali Amman who graduated from Egypt as a pharmacist, Hamid Al-Naserallah and Hmoud Burusli as first wounds dressers.

In the 1940s, the clinic expanded and Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salam asked the members of Information Department who were Ahmed Al-Mishari, Nisf Al-Yousif, Abdul Hamid Al-Sania and Abdullah Zaid Al-Khalid, to supervise the clinic. Mohammed Jassim Al-Nisf was appointed the first director. Other personalities like Yousif Al-Haji and Abdul Mhsain Al-Mukhaizim the administrative official joined the Health Department. Abdul Mhsain Al-Zain and Rudan Al-Rudan helped in the accounting work. On July 30, 1940, the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Ahmed Al-Jaber issued the first health law. Its articles included the organizational matters of the Health Department related to the health council as well as the authorities of both the technical and administrative directors, the thing that led to expanding services and legislations of health affairs. "It was hard work," Yousif Al-Haji said. "The director Muhammed Al-Mudhif did not have a car in 1944, so he had to come on foot. Others came on bicycles. We worked in morning and evening shifts. Due to the great number of patients, we had to work till late hours and exert much efforts."

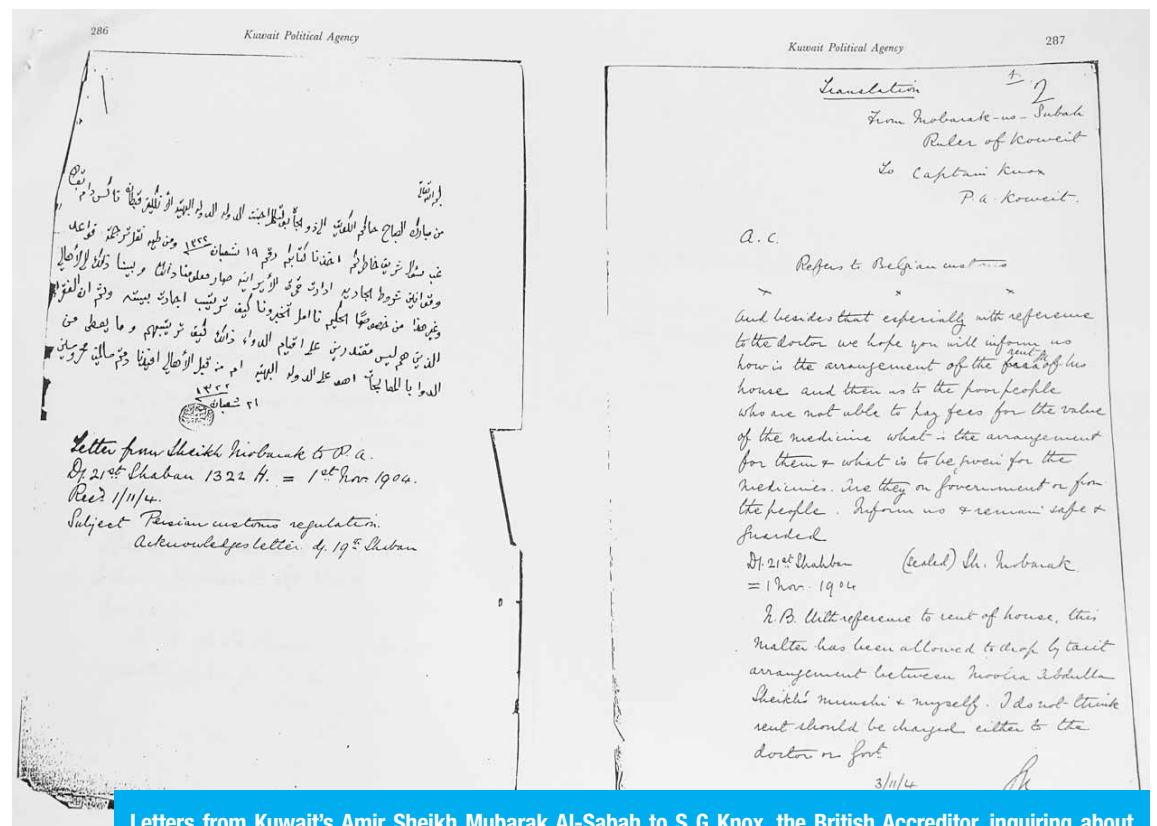
All efforts exerted by the people of Kuwait before oil showed the great sacrifices they presented at that time. The voluntary work in Kuwait is really extinguished and different from other countries. It has recently been seen during the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), so no wonder to see it in Kuwait. This made the regional director of WHO in the Middle East, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, to praise and laud the efforts of Kuwait in combating and containing the virus in collaboration with non-Kuwaitis and expatriates.

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Letters from Kuwait's Amir Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah to S G Knox, the British Accreditor, inquiring about treating Kuwaitis at the British Accreditation Foundation clinic.

Local

Kuwait braces for different Ramadan atmosphere

No feasts, mass prayers, umrah or Eid celebrations

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Ramadan is coming. But this month will be recorded in history as being different than in previous years. In fact, this is the first Ramadan to be observed under lockdown and curfew at the same time. The government has announced the extension of a public holiday until May 28 and the curfew from 4 pm to 8 am due to the coronavirus outbreak. It means throughout Ramadan, there will be no mass prayers, no feasts after fasting hours and no umrah pilgrimages. Also, no Eid al-Fitr celebrations will take place.

“This is the saddest Ramadan we will experience in history. Until now, we don't know what is going to happen - are we all going to die? What is in store for humanity? I feel so sad about what is going on in the world today. I ask Allah for His mercy to extend to every one of us,” said Osama, a devout Muslim. “I am quite disturbed, and we pray for Allah's mercy. We are sorry for all the iniquities done in His name, and we ask for forgiveness and a second chance,” he said.

Osama vowed to not miss a single prayer during Ramadan and observe fasting as always. “For me, there will be more fervent prayers instead with the family. Since we cannot go out to pray in the mosque, we will be praying inside the house. Plus there will be a curfew, so our movements will be limited. If I invite my children and grandchildren to come to my house, I will not allow them to go out until 8 am because of the curfew. Indeed, this will be a different Ramadan for us,” he said.

Noura's tradition of decorating her house with colorful Ramadan lamps will not be possible now, but she said she will try her best to improvise so she could still feel the usual Ramadan. “I will try to study how I can improvise the Ramadan lantern. I used to decorating my house and rooms with Ramadan lanterns, but now I cannot because all the stores are closed. Only baqalas are open and they only have limited stocks. I will really miss that very much,” she noted. “I will surely miss meeting with friends,

ghabqas, girgian, and food will be limited. Even if you want to cook much, who will eat it? Also, I will miss wearing daraas (gowns) and hadiyas,” Noura said.

Khalid normally observes Ramadan with friends, and for him, this is the most auspicious month of the year. “I still believe in the miracle of Ramadan. Allah will show His power and amazing grace to everyone. I believe that Allah is in control and will always be in control. This will be different from the Ramadans in my 62-plus years of existence...this Ramadan is a blessing for us,” he said.

Fatoum said she will not miss anything related to her faith. “I am still going to pray at home; there's no change in my regular prayer schedule. The only change is the curfew and lockdown perhaps, but it doesn't matter - it will never change my decision to pray regularly and fast,” she said.

In Kuwait, traditionally in this period, all shopping centers are adorned with Ramadan decorations, ghabqas and iftar gatherings are scheduled, and people are busy preparing food and shopping items



KUWAIT: This file photo shows an empty Gulf Road in Kuwait shortly after curfew started. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

needed in Ramadan. According to Fatoum, there will be free food handouts, but the usual tents will not be permitted to distribute food to the hungry. “Maybe food packets will be distributed in the streets, but no

more tents. There will be more intense prayers too, so it's a matter of accepting the new Ramadan order. This is anyway temporary and we pray that the coronavirus will be defeated soon,” she said.

KCCI announces working hours during Ramadan

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) announced yesterday that it will be operating during the holy month of Ramadan. KCCI will continue to provide its services from 9:00 am to 2:30 pm on all days a week except Fridays. Due to the official precautionary measures and decisions related to

eliminating the spread of coronavirus, work will be limited to the KCCI headquarters only in Qibla, Abdulaziz Hamad Al-Saqer Street, opposite the Kuwait Development Fund. KCCI set these working hours to allow its member companies and institutions to finish work without delays, especially related to import and export and particularly foodstuff, medical products and vital supplies.

Five hurt in restaurant fire



KUWAIT: The restaurant's kitchen after the fire.

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Bidaa and Salmiya fire stations responded to a call about a fire in a restaurant caused by a gas cylinder that exploded in the kitchen. The fire was put out, and five injured workers were taken to hospital. An investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the fire.

Policeman attacked

Interior ministry's relations and security information department said police responded to a call about a man attacking a house. When police asked

him for his ID, he refused to hand it then attacked and injured the policeman. The suspect was taken to the police station where he started a fire in the detention cell, causing three policemen to suffer from smoke inhalation, who were taken to hospital. The suspect is being transferred to concerned authorities. The department also commented on a video clip about a verbal exchange between a policeman and a volunteer at a co-op. It said the policeman was summoned, and when questioned, he was found in violation. Administrative measures and punishment were taken against him.



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India's migrant workers fall through cracks in lockdown

52 villagers killed by jihadists in Mozambique



BORG EL ARAB: In this file photo taken during a guided tour organized by the Egyptian State Information Service, inmates receive medical treatment at the clinic of Borg El-Arab prison near the Egyptian city of Alexandria. — AFP

Virus fear haunts Egypt cramped jails

Prison population estimated at 114,000

CAIRO: Last April, medical student Mohamed Amashah stood on Cairo's Tahrir Square and held up a sign saying "Freedom for prisoners". He was detained. Now awaiting trial for more than a year on charges of misusing social media and helping a terrorist group, the Egyptian-American fears the spread of the coronavirus in Egypt's crowded jails.

Last month Amashah, who suffers from an autoimmune disease and asthma, started a hunger strike to draw attention to his plight, his parents said. He is one of 114,000 prisoners in Egypt, according to a recent UN estimate. Egypt, which has a population of 100 million, has reported 3,490 cases of the new coronavirus, including 264 deaths. Top officials have expressed confidence they can contain the outbreak through measures including quarantine, a night curfew in place since March 25, and public information campaigns.

But since the country's first case on Feb. 14, relatives and rights groups have called for the release of detainees, including political prisoners swept up in a crackdown on dissent under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Some rights groups, lawyers, and current and former prisoners say inmates are often kept in cramped, dirty cells and lack running water, adequate ventilation and healthcare: conditions ripe for the rapid transmission of disease. While countries including Iran, Germany and Canada have freed prisoners in an effort to contain the coronavirus epidemic, Egypt has given no public sign it will do so.

The government press centre forwarded to Reuters an Interior Ministry statement on Thursday saying that it was taking all necessary preventative and protective

measures for prison staff, ensuring cleaning, healthcare and testing inside places of detention. The government also suspended family visits to prisons on March 10 to limit risk of infection, though some families say the measure makes it harder for them to deliver supplies including soap and medicine.

The interior ministry said it allowed for prisoners' belongings to be brought in, and the exchange of messages. In November, authorities organized tightly supervised tours of Cairo's sprawling Tora prison complex, where former President Mohamed Morsi collapsed and died in a prison courtroom last year, and where Amashah is held. The tours followed a report by UN experts that said that poor prison conditions may have led directly to Morsi's death and was putting thousands more at severe risk.

Prison protest

A hunger strike started on several wards at Tora in late February in protest at poor conditions, a lack of information about the new coronavirus and a failure to disinfect cells, said a human rights lawyer in contact with inmates. The lawyer added that the hunger strike had ended after about a week when prison officials began letting in more medicine, clothes and letters.

An Interior Ministry spokesman did not respond to

phone calls or Whatsapp messages asking for comment on the lawyer's account. Amashah continued his protest and was moved to the prison hospital, his father Abdel-Megeed told Reuters, saying he feared his son could suffer the same fate as Moustafa Kassem, an Egyptian-American who died in prison in Egypt in January after staging a liquid-only hunger strike.

"Will they leave him until he dies? I know nothing about him, I am unable to even talk to him to tell him to stop," said Amashah's mother, Naglaa Abdel Fattah. The Interior Ministry spokesman could not be reached for comment on Amashah's case. The US embassy in Cairo declined to comment directly on Amashah, but said it had requested permission to speak with an unspecified number of incarcerated American citizens by phone until visits resumed.

On April 10, a group of bipartisan US senators sent a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asking him to call for the release of US prisoners, citing the risk from the new coronavirus. The letter mentioned Amashah and 14 other prisoners including two more in Egypt and others in countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria. The US State Department declined to comment on the letter specifically. David Schenker, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, said in Feb-

ruary that detained Americans came up "with some frequency" in dialogue with Egypt.

'State of panic'

Alaa Abdel Fattah, a leading activist in Egypt's 2011 uprising held in remand detention at Tora on charges including spreading false news, belonging to a terrorist organization and misusing social media, also started a hunger strike on April 13, his relatives said. "While Egypt enters its third week of curfew, family members on both sides of the prison walls are being kept in a state of panic," they said in a statement. The Interior Ministry did not respond to a request for comment on Abdel Fattah's situation.

Abdel Fattah's mother, sister and aunt were briefly detained last month after staging a rare public protest to highlight the risk of the coronavirus in prisons. Rights researchers fear guards could bring the virus to prisons and said there had been several suspected cases in Tora and at Wadi al-Natroun prison, northwest of Cairo. Reuters was unable to confirm independently whether any prisoners had tested positive. Two prison sector sources said 14 suspected cases in three prisons had all tested negative. Conditions at prisons vary. One detainee contacted by Reuters said he feared the spread of the virus because physical distancing was impossible at his Cairo prison, where the 15 inmates in his cell each had about 0.5 square meters - not an unusual level of overcrowding, according to researchers. The International Committee of the Red Cross recommends minimum accommodation space globally of 3.4 meters squared for each detainee. — Reuters



Relatives push for prisoners release

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US state sues China leaders over virus

MISSOURI: The US state of Missouri on Tuesday sued China's leadership over the COVID-19 coronavirus, seeking damages over what it described as deliberate deception and insufficient action to stop the pandemic. The first-of-a-kind state lawsuit comes amid calls in Congress to punish China and a campaign by President Donald Trump to focus on Beijing's role, amid criticism of his own handling of the crisis. Missouri, led by Trump's Republican Party, filed a lawsuit in a federal court seeking an unspecified amount in damages and an injunction on continuing actions by China

that are alleged to include hoarding of protective equipment.

"The Chinese government lied to the world about the danger and contagious nature of COVID-19, silenced whistleblowers and did little to stop the spread of the disease," Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt said. "They must be held accountable for their actions," he said. The lawsuit's chances of success are far from certain as US law, under the principle of sovereign immunity, generally forbids court action against foreign governments. Missouri addressed the issue by suing the ruling Communist Party, arguing that it is not formally an organ of the Chinese state. Citing an estimate that Missouri may lose tens of billions of dollars due to the virus and action to prevent it, the lawsuit accused the Chinese Communist Party of being in "knowing, willful and in reckless disregard of the rights of the state and its residents." — AFP

Virus turns health workers in Egypt into 'outcasts'

CAIRO: After showing symptoms similar to those of the coronavirus, Egyptian doctor Ahmed Negm went into self-isolation in an old apartment, but before long he was hounded out by fearful neighbors. While health workers in many countries are getting cheers and applause for risking their lives in the gruelling battle against the disease, in some parts of the world they face suspicion and hostility.

Though they are regularly hailed by the North African nation's government and media as Egypt's "white (coated) army", many health personnel have complained of being shunned and mistreated by others in society. Negm had already tested negative for the virus but, mindful of the fact that he had frequently dealt with suspected cases, decided to go into confinement as a precaution. As the 31-year-old sealed himself off from the outside world, rumors swirled around his neighborhood in the northeastern province of Ismailia that he was infected and avoiding treatment.

He was even reported to the police. Despite explaining his situation to them, the doctor faced continued harassment, snide remarks and pleas from some of his neighbors to leave the area because "there were many children and elderly." Eventually, Negm moved out. "People are gripped by panic but they're taking it too far to a point where it feels like a stigma," he said. "It's as if we have become outcasts."

Egypt's health workers, like those elsewhere, have been stretched thin by the virus, grappling with long hours, soaring



CAIRO: Egyptians shop at the roofed Khayamiya Street in the old city of the Egyptian capital Cairo ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. — AFP

caseloads and a high risk of catching the disease themselves. Medical staff in several hospitals in Cairo and other provinces have been infected. Four doctors have died out of 43 who fell ill, according to the country's doctors union. Health workers account for some 13 percent of Egypt's total confirmed COVID-19 cases, which have risen above 3,000 including more than 200 fatalities, according to the World Health Organization.

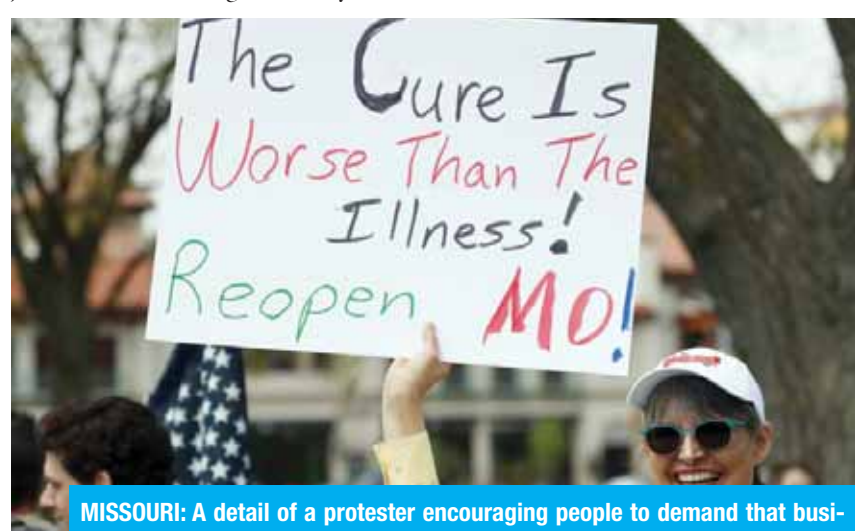
'Worthless apology'

Even after death, one doctor who had caught the virus was targeted by fearful villagers who protested against her burial in Daqahliya province in the Nile Delta. Authorities dispersed the hours-long demonstration and arrested 23 people as part of an investigation into what the public prosecutor described as "an act of terror". Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli deplored the "disgraceful" act and urged healthcare workers to "pay no heed".

A nurse in the same province who had tested positive for the virus said she and

other infected healthcare workers were contacted by strangers after their names and contact details were widely shared on social media. "Many called to support and pray for us ... but others accused us of spreading the virus and of being the source of infection," she said, wearing a mask, her voice quivering in a video posted online. "We're exhausted. Have mercy on us. Our spirits have been destroyed."

Dina Abdelsalam, a doctor in Ismailia province, said her neighbors publicly smeared her because she works at a hospital which receives suspected coronavirus cases. After recently moving to a new apartment to keep away from her family as a precaution, she said she was startled by her neighbors shouting in the street, accusing her of "bringing the disease" to the area. The police intervened and her neighbors eventually apologized. But for Abdelsalam their apology was "worthless" after they treated her like a "suspected (criminal)". "We (medics) are suffering," she said in an online video, "and you are making it worse." — AFP



MISSOURI: A detail of a protester encouraging people to demand that businesses be allowed to open up, and people allowed to go back to work. The protest was part of a growing national movement against stay-at-home orders designed to slow the spread of the coronavirus. — AFP

International

Returning to COVID-19 frontlines, healed caregivers remain uneasy

9,000 health care workers sickened by the virus

WASHINGTON: After spending three weeks in isolation, Justin Jara returns to work Tuesday at his hospital in Detroit, but he doesn't have a lot of faith in the test that showed he now has antibodies against the new coronavirus. "I still have fear, I am scared to go back to work," the 26-year-old nurse said. "A doctor told me that I'm immune and I have antibodies but still, it's not scientifically proven yet."

Across the United States, some 9,000 health care workers have been sickened by the virus that causes COVID-19, and more than two dozen have died, according to official figures released last week. The rest, like Jara, have recovered and - as they make their way back to work - are entering a world of unknowns. So far, there is no proven treatment or vaccine for SARS-CoV-2, and scientists don't know whether it has long-term impacts on the lungs, kidneys or other organs. Does infection confer immunity? And if so, will that immunity be seasonal, like for colds, or life-long, like for measles?

Many caregivers don't have the option of working from home. They're needed back on the front-line, in many cases at the same place where they contracted the virus. Jara fell ill in late March, back at a time when it wasn't deemed necessary for the nurses in his unit to wear protective gear because it was a so-called "clean unit" with no coronavirus patients. One patient, however, turned out to be infected despite a negative test result. Jara recovered at home, riding out the high fever, muscle aches and shortness of breath that characterize mild cases.



But he is heading back to a hospital that has completely changed. The 35 beds in his unit are taken up exclusively by COVID-19 patients. He had to learn, online, how to use the new and omnipresent oxygen machines. A new rule states that nurses can only enter rooms a few times per day, barring an emergency, in order to limit the risk of spread. And personal protective equipment is an absolute must: masks, face shields, gowns and gloves. "I'm going to probably be really cautious to prevent reinfection for myself," Jara said.

Protecting loved ones

More than a month after he got infected, Richard Whelan, a 63-year-old colorectal surgeon in New York, doesn't even know whether he has antibodies against the virus. The so-called serological test isn't widely available in America's most populous city, the world's worst-hit hotspot, as it is in Detroit where Jara lives. Whelan was bed-ridden for 12 days, leaving him "wiped out." His hospital, Lenox Hill, has canceled all elec-

tive procedures, and the doctor is assisting in a 24-bed COVID unit.

Like everyone else, he wears a mask and a gown. "I don't want to contaminate my wife and my daughter," Whelan says. He's also uncertain about his own recovery, given that his age places him in a vulnerable category. "I'm not willing to give a blood donation of my plasma right now because I need them," says Whelan, as New York organizes plasma collections from recovered patients as a form of experimental therapy for those who still have the disease.

looking abroad to purchase it.

Speaking after his first personal meeting with Trump since the health crisis began, Cuomo acknowledged that the testing itself is the responsibility of individual states. "But we need help from the federal government to make the supply chain work for the manufacturers, on the reagents, test kits, et cetera, and we said that we'd like to work together in New York state to take our current rate of testing—we do about 20,000 tests a day on average—and double that. Go to 40,000."

"It's a very aggressive goal, and we said that we would work together to meet that goal, so it was a very good conversation," said Cuomo. Cuomo also said he regretted that a new \$480-billion relief package that was passed by the Senate Tuesday leaves out a key Democratic demand: extra funding for state and local governments battling the pandemic. "We mentioned briefly the state aid. We talked about that, Governor Cuomo and I, and I agree with him on that. I think most Republicans agree with that," Trump said at his daily briefing on the pandemic.

Trump said earlier in the day he wants such funding included in the next coronavirus rescue package, and congressional leaders said the forthcoming bill was already in the works. The presi-

are likely to have died, from the virus. As well as the threat of depression and anxiety faced by billions of people under social isolation orders worldwide, health professionals on the front line must deal with death and the high risk of contagion every day.

Tai chi

"This is a time that is really testing our resilience," said Jonathan Ripp, an internist at New York's network of eight Mount Sinai hospitals. Ripp, the co-author of a study that seeks to understand anxiety among medical staff during the pandemic and which was published this month in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, said medical staff concerns are numerous. "Are we going to have enough equipment? How am I going to get to work? Who's going to take care of my kids?" he told AFP, citing some of the worries. "How am I going to be prepared to take care of patients in a setting that I'm not used to... What if I'm dealing with patients who are critically ill, who are dying?" Ripp added. In an attempt to help its staff, Mount Sinai provides answers to questions on a dedicated website, created a 24-hour mental health hotline, runs virtual support groups, and offers meditation, yoga, and tai chi classes.

Mental health professionals also contact staff to ask how they are feeling. Heather Isola, a physician

and Iran - in 177th and 173rd place respectively - of censoring major coronavirus outbreaks.

Alluding to accusations that Beijing concealed the initial extent of the outbreak, it said China "maintains its system of information hyper-control, whose negative effects for the entire world have been seen during the coronavirus public health crisis", Europe has also not been immune - Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orban, has passed a special law on false information which was a "completely disproportionate and coercive measure".

RSF said there was a "clear correlation" between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic and a country's ranking in the index. While Norway topped the index for the fourth year in a row, Finland was again the runner-up. North Korea took last position from Turkmenistan, and Eritrea continued to be Africa's lowest-ranked country at number 178. The third biggest leap was by Sudan, which rose 16 places to 159th after the removal of president Omar al-Bashir. France lost two places to rank 32nd, with journal-



WASHINGTON: Nurses protest against the lack of personal protection equipment amid the covid-19 pandemic in front of the White House in Washington, DC. —AFP

"I need my antibodies to protect me." On the other side of the country, in Seattle, emergency department nurse Terry West recalls a sense of "relief" at being among the first wave of those infected and recovered. The 55-year-old went back to work on April 5. But she cannot feel completely at ease given that her husband is a lung cancer survivor, making him vulnerable to the disease. "We always gown up, we always glove up, we always wear a mask. I don't want to tempt fate," says West, who had only moderate symptoms.

Even if the chances of reinfection are considered low, she doesn't want to bring home virus particles on her clothes and in her hair. There is one area where she is willing to take some risk. She regular volunteers to take care of patients considered more likely to spread the disease because the "BiPAP" oxygen machines they are on release their exhaled air into the room. "If you're unsure and you have little kids at home or you have elderly people living with you, I'm willing to step forward and go in," she said. —AFP

Cuomo presses Trump for more federal help in coronavirus testing

WASHINGTON: New York Governor Andrew Cuomo pressed President Donald Trump Tuesday for more help from the federal government to carry out coronavirus testing during a face-to-face meeting he described as cordial and productive after weeks of sometimes nasty exchanges. As the virus death toll in the US keeps rising and now stands at nearly 45,000, widespread testing is viewed as key to states being able to lift stay-at-home orders and reopen their shuttered economies.

Cuomo said his state, the hardest hit in America by the pandemic, wants to double its daily testing rate quickly and pressed Trump for the federal government to take control of the supply chain for reagents and other medical equipment to carry out the tests. The goal is to spare states from bidding against each other on the open market to acquire the material, as they have been doing, or

Coronavirus takes mental toll on New York medical staff

NEW YORK: Battling to keep intensive care patients alive at a hospital in one of New York City's worst-affected coronavirus neighborhoods is taking a toll on nurse Debbie Sanchez's mental health. "I have extreme anxiety," said Sanchez, who has been working 12-hour shifts covered head-to-toe in protective clothing since New York became the epicenter of America's COVID-19 outbreak last month. Sanchez, 57, was working in the emergency room at Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx when she was moved to help the facility's overwhelmed intensive care unit.

She is not a trained ICU nurse and lives in fear she will make a mistake. Sanchez also hasn't seen her granddaughter in over a month for fear of infecting her. "The whole thing of changing your whole life is what's stressful. I have a hard time sleeping," she admitted to AFP. New York state accounts for around a third of America's 42,500 COVID-19 deaths. More than 14,000 people in New York City have died, or

Coronavirus 'amplifies press freedom threats'

PARIS: The coronavirus pandemic is exacerbating threats to press freedom around the world, with authoritarian states including China and Iran suppressing details of the outbreak, activists said. Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said in its annual press freedom rankings the pandemic was "highlighting and amplifying the many crises" already casting a shadow on press freedom.

The outbreak had encouraged some regimes to "take advantage of the fact people are stunned and mobilisation has weakened to impose measures that would be impossible to adopt in normal times", RSF secretary general Christophe Deloire said. The rankings saw few major changes from last year, with Nordic countries regarded as the most free and isolated states Turkmenistan and North Korea footing the list of 180 countries. RSF accused China



NEW YORK: A person crosses the street at very quiet Times Square in New York City. During his daily coronavirus (COVID-19) briefing, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said the death toll dropped below 500 in a 24 hour period for the first time since the peak of the pandemic. —AFP

dent also had positive words for Cuomo. "I can say very honestly, with New York state and New York City, they've been terrific to work with," he said. Trump's administration is keen to get Americans back to work and has said there are enough tests for each state to move to "phase one" of a gradual reopening, ending some stay-at-home restrictions. —AFP



NEW YORK: Medical workers hold signs outside NYU Langone Health hospital as people applaud to show their appreciation to medical staff and essential workers on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic in New York City. —AFP

assistant who oversees 900 colleagues, said her worst day was when one of them was diagnosed with COVID-19 and was hospitalized in a serious condition. "It was probably the peak of the disease as well and the peak in the hospital so that was the breaking day," recalled the 36-year-old. "The same thing every day... is draining," she added. —AFP

ists in the country sometimes the victims of police violence at demonstrations, it said. Published annually by RSF since 2002, the World Press Freedom Index assesses factors such as media independence, self-censorship, the legal framework and transparency based on a questionnaire filled out by experts.

'Chinese-style scenario'

Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been repeatedly criticized for cracking down on press freedom, rose three places to 154th but RSF said this was because of "other countries falling" rather than positive change. It said censorship of the media, especially online media, has been stepped up in Turkey and the country was "more authoritarian than ever." Russia, under President Vladimir Putin, in 149th place, is also persevering "efforts to control the Internet, using ever more elaborate methods", it said, citing a law that would allow the country to disconnect the Russian internet from the rest of the world. —AFP

News in brief

'Appalling' crime leaves 9 dead

BEIRUT: Nine people were found dead in a Lebanese town southeast of the capital Beirut on Tuesday, a security source told AFP, in what the prime minister called an "appalling crime". The bodies of six Syrians, two of whom were children, and three Lebanese including a woman, were discovered in a house and a nearby forested area near Baakline in the Chouf region, the source said. Marwan Hamadeh, a Baakline-born MP, said it was a "crime of honor" by a man suffering "psychological disorders", without giving further details. Prime Minister Hassan Diab called for a speedy manhunt. According to a preliminary police investigation most of the victims suffered gunshot wounds, while the woman had been stabbed, the source said. The source did not say whether the victims were related to the killer, or indicate a motive. —AFP

US immigration suspension

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump said Tuesday he was suspending immigration for green card seekers for 60 days, arguing the controversial move would help Americans find work again after coronavirus caused a surge in unemployment. Trump told reporters at the White House the suspension would come into force through an executive order that he would likely sign on Wednesday as he offered the first details about a vague announcement he made Monday night on Twitter. Addressing an issue key to his conservative base as the country is ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic, with more than 43,000 people dead in the US, Trump said his move would help Americans who have lost their jobs during the ongoing shutdown. "By pausing immigration, it will help put unemployed Americans first in line for jobs as America reopens," Trump said at his daily pandemic briefing. —AFP

Virus hits 34 ship crew

TOKYO: At least 34 crew members aboard a cruise ship docked in the Japanese city of Nagasaki have tested positive for coronavirus, local authorities said yesterday. The Costa Atlantica first arrived in Nagasaki in January to undergo repairs, with several hundred crew on board. Over the weekend, the ship's operator contacted local authorities seeking help to test suspected cases on board. An initial four tests carried out on the ship revealed a first infection on Monday, with additional testing among 57 crew finding a total of 34 cases yesterday. "Many infections have been confirmed on the ship," Nagasaki governor Hodo Nakamura told reporters yesterday. "We hope that they will be able to go home in full health as soon as possible. We are asking the national government for help." Nakamura said those infected and other crew members remain on the ship, adding that the ship's operator has told local officials that crew members are self-isolating. —AFP

Virus hits Quebec nursing homes

MONTREAL: Officials in Quebec, the Canadian province hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic, revealed Tuesday that more than eight out of every 10 deaths there came at nursing homes. The staggering figure comes following a massive public outcry over the dire situation at the private Herron facility in a Montreal suburb, where 31 people died in just a few weeks after many of their caregivers fled the premises. The province has rushed thousands of doctors to care for the 4,000 nursing home patients who have contracted the virus. "Out of the 1,041 deaths we've seen up until now, 850 of them were at residences for the elderly," Quebec's premiere Francois Legault told reporters. "Many died after they were taken to hospital," he added, calling the situation in Quebec's elder care facilities "the great challenge" facing his government. —AFP

International

India's migrant workers fall through cracks in lockdown

The biggest mass movements of people since partition of India

JUGYAI: Most days, you can find Dayaram Kushwaha and his wife, Gyanvati, hauling bricks for stonemasons in a booming northern suburb of New Delhi. They bring their 5-year-old son, who plays in the dirt while they work. But now a hush has come over the clattering construction site, silenced by India's nationwide order to shelter in place to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus. Site managers no longer come to the intersection where Dayaram and many others stand, hoping to pick up work.

And so, with no way to feed his family or pay the rent, Dayaram hoisted his son Shivam onto his shoulders and began to walk to the village where he was born, 300 miles away. He tried not to worry about what would happen once he got there, with empty pockets instead of the money he usually sent home to help support those left behind. At least he would have a home. By dusk on the second day, Dayaram and around 50 others from his extended family had reached a deserted expressway running south out of the capital.

The family was hungry, thirsty and tired, and the police were never far away. Every time they stopped to rest, officers would shout at them to keep moving in single file, to maintain distance from one another to avoid spreading the virus. Officers are under orders to enforce the lockdown, but on that day they were allowing people to move. Dayaram, 28, looked around. Thousands of other migrant workers were doing the same thing, in one of the biggest mass movements of people in the country since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

It began to rain. Dayaram's thoughts turned to his other son, 7-year-old Mangal, who had been left behind in the village with elderly relatives because it was too hard to care for two children while he and his wife worked. He missed him. In the middle of a

pandemic, there was one consolation: "At least I will be with him."

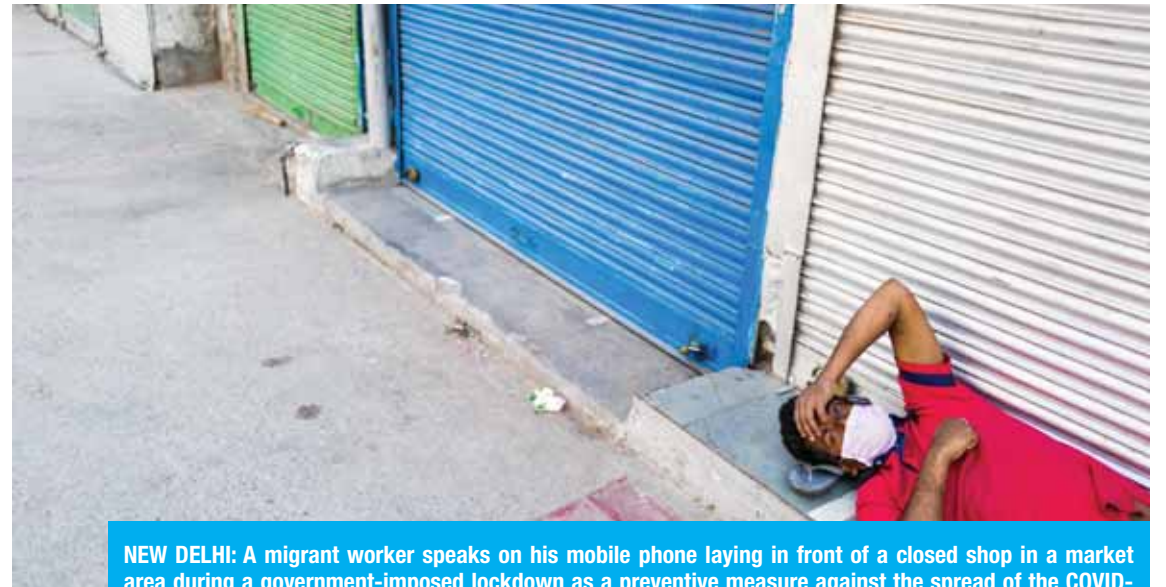
Push and pull

For decades, villages across India have been emptying out. To many people, the decision is one of simple arithmetic: to earn \$6 per day instead of \$3 back home. In areas like the parched Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh state, home to Dayaram's ancestral village, living off the land has become increasingly difficult as rainfall recedes. Others seek something more abstract: the prospect of escape that pulls anyone toward a big city.

But after the shutdown, the cities themselves began to empty. Dayaram and his family were among the first to move. As the days went on, and the situation became more desperate, hundreds of thousands of migrants emerged from factories and workplaces in search of a way home.

Indian officials say the shutdown is necessary to beat coronavirus in the densely populated country of 1.3 billion people, with a health infrastructure that can ill afford a widespread outbreak. But for Dayaram and many of India's estimated 140 million migrant laborers, the epidemic is much more than a threat to their health - it endangers their very economic survival. In the shutdown, India has banned domestic and international travel, and factories, schools, offices and all shops other than those supplying essential services have been shut. Taken together, the measures amount to one of the harshest lockdowns in the world. Cases here have spiked to nearly 17,000, with more than 500 deaths. On April 14, the government extended the curbs until at least May 3, prompting clashes between police and migrants trying to leave India's financial capital, Mumbai.

Migrants are the backbone of the urban econo-



NEW DELHI: A migrant worker speaks on his mobile phone laying in front of a closed shop in a market area during a government-imposed lockdown as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

my. Construction workers such as Dayaram are a necessity for India's rapidly expanding cities. Others clean toilets, drive taxis and deliver takeout. They predominantly earn daily wages, with no prospect of job security, and live in dirty, densely populated slums, saving money to send back home. That money is essential to the young and elderly left behind in villages. Around \$30 billion flows from urban to rural areas in India each year, according to government and academic estimates. Now that infusion of money, transferred through rural banks or in worn stacks of rupees borne home on rare visits, has come to a halt. The journey from New Delhi deep

into rural India is one not just of distance, but of traveling back in time. Skyscrapers and well-paved toll roads give way to fields of wheat and okra. Bare-backed men till the land with buffalo; an elderly shepherd herds his goats down a dusty lane. After four days of walking and hitching lifts on a series of goods trucks, Dayaram, Gyanvati and Shivam reached their family's two-room concrete hut in Jugyai, a farming village of 2,000 people. In a dingy room in the house filled with sacks of grain and clothes, an unframed poster hangs on the wall. It depicts a handsome red-roofed house on a lake, sun setting behind snow-capped mountains. — Reuters

US failed to block UN virus vaccine resolution

UNITED NATIONS: The UN General Assembly has demanded equal access for any future COVID-19 vaccine but its seeming unanimity was a fluke. The United States in fact opposed the resolution but acted too late to stop it, diplomats say. The 193 members of the General Assembly adopted by consensus Monday a resolution led by Mexico that calls for "equitable, efficient and timely" access to any vaccine developed to fight the pandemic. But the non-binding resolution irked the United States for another reason. It highlighted the "crucial leading role" of the World Health Organization, which President Donald Trump has strongly criticized for not doing more to halt the virus after it was detected in China.

The adoption of the text was announced three hours after the vote, an unusually long gap. The reason for the delay, diplomats told AFP, was that the United States had tried unsuccessfully to block it after the fact. There is no veto at the General Assembly, which includes every UN member state, unlike the more powerful Security Council where five powers—Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States—can stop any resolution.

In ordinary times, the General Assembly adopts resolutions either by consensus or by majority votes—displayed openly on an electronic board or held secretly in the case of elections. But faced with the coronavirus pandemic, the General Assembly has changed its way of doing business until at least late May to avoid physical meetings at the UN headquarters in New York. Under the temporary setup, a country puts forward a text which is adopted after a "period of silence" of several days in which any member can voice objections—effectively a veto.

The United States did not "break the silence" before Monday's deadline for the resolution—but, according to diplomats, tried to voice objections just afterward. "One delegation wanted to break the silence after the silence," a diplomat told AFP, with another diplomat confirming the United States was the country. The US mission at the United Nations did not respond to requests for comment. Trump has ramped up his broadsides against the WHO amid criticism at home over his handling of the crisis.

Concerns for upcoming votes

For the United Nations, the temporary procedures were seen as vital to ensure that texts, not to mention budgetary authorizations, can move forward. But the arrangement effectively lets any one of 193 nations hold up the entire United Nations. On April 3, no country broke the silence to stop a resolution that called in general terms for international cooperation to fight COVID-19.

But a separate bid the same day by Russia to urge the lifting of economic sanctions amid the pandemic was blocked by Ukraine, Georgia, the United States and European Union. Russia has moved forward this week with another resolution that targets sanctions. It calls on all nations to "face global challenges as good neighbors, refraining from implementing protectionist and discriminatory measures inconsistent with the World Trade Organization rules." — AFP

Fleeing pandemic, many Venezuelan migrants head home

CALI: For the second time in less than a year, Jesus Pena is on the run. The first time, he was fleeing poverty in his native Venezuela. Now, he's heading back to his crisis-stricken home to escape the death spread by the novel coronavirus. "We want to go back so we don't die," the 49-year-old explained during a stop in Cali, Colombia. He arrived after 12 days of traveling, mostly on foot, from neighboring Ecuador—one of the Latin American countries worst hit by the pandemic.

The blisters dotting his feet are the least of his worries. He is relieved because he, his wife, their son and his sister-in-law will soon board a bus chartered by the city to ferry Venezuelan migrants the 595 miles (957 kilometers) to the border. Dozens of others wait along with them. They fled Ecuador and other countries in the region, carefully sneaking through closed borders or taking advantage of opened humanitarian corridors.

Many attempted to rebuild their lives in Colombia but have since given up. They decided to

COVID-19: Mistrust and black market flourish in Nigeria

LAGOS: A black market in coronavirus test kits is flourishing in Nigeria, spurred in part by negligible faith in the country's health system to defeat an emerging threat. Testing is a crucial weapon in combating COVID-19. It not only identifies where the stealthy virus has invaded—it also helps to prevent frontline workers, in health care and the economy, from falling sick in turn. Every country is struggling to carry out sufficient testing, but in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, the situation is dire. Just 7,100 tests have officially been carried out in a population of around 200 million people.

By comparison, neighboring Ghana, which has a population of 30 million, has carried out 68,000 tests, while South Africa, with 58 million people, has conducted nearly 114,000. Right now, Nigeria's 36 states have 12 official coronavirus labs, which together have a capacity to test 1,500 people per day. "We have no idea of the status of propagation of COVID-19 in Nigeria," a representative of a private medical lab said. The lab is awaiting government approval to purchase thousands of test kits and a machine able to carry out several hundred tests per hour.

But "demand for these tests on the black market is off the scale, off the scale," the source said. Lacking the equipment, the lab had to turn away a request from a foreign embassy to carry out tests for its citizens. Nigeria's extreme need and its dextrous entrepreneurs have unsurprisingly combined to create an instant black market. Aware of the danger that this represents, the government has warned Nigerians against fake do-it-yourself kits that are emerging online.

Mistrust

The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) is carrying out doorstep testing in Abuja and the state of Lagos—the epicentres of the country's 627 infections, of which 21 have been fatal. The authorities are also putting boots on the ground, in the form of neighborhood virus tracers, and opening brand-new quarantine centers in their show of diligence. But they are facing a deep lack of faith in a



CALI: Health workers wearing biosafety suits take a test of a local family during a checkup for the COVID-19 novel coronavirus at Nueva Floresta neighborhood in Cali, Colombia. — AFP

go home after finding themselves without jobs or income during government-imposed COVID-19 lockdowns—or out of fear of epidemic-fueled xenophobia. Pena lived only nine months in Loja, in the south of Ecuador. But he quickly grew afraid: "People are dying, no one pays attention or wears a mask, everyone is out in the streets."

35,000 migrants returned

He also worried about what would happen if he



LAGOS: A vehicle drives to distribute relief palliatives to cushion the effect of lockdown to prevent the spread COVID-19 coronavirus in Lagos. — AFP

public health system left crippled by decades of neglect. Nearly four of every five public health facilities across Nigeria do not even have running water, Dr Francis Faduyile, president of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), said last month.

Thousands of Nigerian doctors work in Europe's well-funded health services but at home, there are just 0.4 physicians per 1,000 people. Mistrust of the public health system is such that many patients are terrified of being declared to the NCDC, a physician in a private medical clinic said. "My patients don't want to come to the hospital, they think we are the NCDC police who will take them to Yaba," the source said, referring to a government-run facility for COVID-19 patients.

"They tell me on the phone, 'If we come, you don't send us to Yaba!'" The doctor recounted that, at the start of the month, he had already seen half a dozen patients with coronavirus. Just one of them consented to being tested, which entailed notification to the NCDC. The authorities carried out the test, but the exercise was a waste of time. The test was eventually carried out more than two weeks after the doctor alerted the NCDC—a period longer than the virus's incubation period.

Since then, the doctor has gone through back channels to procure around 20 test kits for his patients. Official testing is "too slow", said Zouera Issoufou, head of the Dangote Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Aliko Dangote, Africa's wealthiest man. The foundation has partnered with the government in the fight against coronavirus and ordered 250,000 test kits. But world demand for the kits has exploded, Issoufou said. — AFP

or one of his family members fell ill. At the hospital, "they would never move an Ecuadorian to make room for a Venezuelan," he said. "It's better to go back to our country," he added. More than 35,000 Venezuelans have already crossed the region, coming from Colombia and elsewhere, according to Felipe Munoz, an official at the border between the two countries.

Colombia is home to about 1.8 million of the 4.9 million Venezuelan migrants who fled their country in recent years as the former oil power's economy crumbled. Bogota, which like the US does not recognize Nicolas Maduro as Venezuela's president, has appealed for international aid to manage a migrant crisis made more acute by the pandemic's attendant health and economic emergencies. Colombia has recorded more than 3,700 cases of the coronavirus, versus some 250 reported in Venezuela. Ecuador, at 10,000 cases, is the region's worst-hit country after Brazil.

Pena is aware that the low number of Venezuelan cases has been doubted by Maduro's opposition and he is bracing himself for the worst. "There's no food, no water nor gas. But what can we do?" he said. Colombia said the migrants are leaving of their own accord and is checking their temperatures as they leave. Luis Plazas, 24, considers himself one of the lucky ones. — AFP

Fifty-two villagers killed by jihadists in Mozambique

MAPUTO: A shadowy Islamist group that has terrorised northern Mozambique killed 52 villagers on April 7 after locals refused to be recruited to their ranks, according to police cited by local media Tuesday. "Recently, the criminals tried to recruit young people to join their ranks, but there was resistance on the part of the youths. This provoked the anger of the criminals, who indiscriminately killed—cruelly and diabolically—52 young people," police spokesman Orlando Mudumane told the state-owned broadcasting service.

The killings took place in the village of Xitaxi in of Muidumbe district. Mudumane said the villagers were "massacred", either shot dead or beheaded. Police said they have launched a manhunt for the attackers to bring them to justice. Militants have in recent weeks stepped up attacks as part of a campaign to establish an Islamist caliphate in the gas-rich region, seizing government buildings, blocking roads and briefly hoisting their black-and-white jihadist flag over towns and villages across Cabo Delgado province.

For more than two years the jihadists mainly targeted isolated villages, killing more than 900 people, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). The unrest has forced hundreds of thousands of locals to flee and raised concern among energy giants operating in the gas-rich region. More than 200,000, according to a local Catholic archbishop, Dom Luiz Fernando, have escaped. Some have sought refuge among friends and relatives in the port city of Pemba, the capital of Cabo Delgado.

Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), affiliated with the Islamic State group, has claimed some of the attacks in the region since last year. Since October 2017, when they first staged an attack in the province, the group hid their identities, but in recent weeks, it has unmasked its fighters and openly declaring its goal of turning the gas-rich region into a caliphate. "We don't want a government from unbelievers, we want a government from Allah," the group member added, speaking in the local Kimwani language to residents rounded up for a rally. — AFP

Business

THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2020

10 For Ukrainian startup, COVID-19 means business is booming



11 Cost of funding for GCC countries rose due to COVID-19: Markaz



11 Oil crash means more misery for US shale producers



LOS ANGELES: A vehicle pulls into a petrol station in Los Angeles, California on Tuesday, a day after oil prices dropped to below zero as the oil industry suffers steep falls in benchmark crudes due to the ongoing global coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

Brent plunges to two-decade low

Oil resumes its painful retreat; global stocks mixed

HONG KONG: Brent hit a two-decade low yesterday as oil resumed its painful retreat and extended a rout that has torn through energy markets, though stock exchanges in Asia and Europe were mixed following a two-day sell-off. With demand virtually non-existent owing to virus lockdowns, and production still high despite storage at bursting point, crude markets have been sent into freefall with WTI for May delivery diving to minus \$40 on Monday.

Focus has turned to the June contract, which started yesterday on fine form following news that top producers had held talks—but it plunged into the red in the afternoon, having lost almost half its value on Tuesday, when Brent collapsed by a fifth. WTI surged 20 percent before changing course to sit more than four percent down later, while Brent was off more than 11 percent after earlier dropping 18 percent to \$15.98 — its lowest since 1999.

The crisis in the oil market caused by coronavirus was compounded by a price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia, but while they drew a line under the row and joined other key producers in slashing output by 10 million barrels a day, that has not been enough.

Crude's rout "merely reflects the underlying theme that there is no demand for physical oil, and

there is nowhere to store it", said AxiCorp's Stephen Innes. "Disappointment following the new (oil cut) agreement continues to resonate, and responding to that outcry could be the one thing that turns the oil price around in the near term, absent evidence of demand recovery."

Analysts said the morning bounce was driven by



Saudi-Russia price war compounds crisis

news that members of OPEC, as well as some allies in the OPEC+ grouping, held a teleconference Tuesday—but gloom soon returned. Equity markets, buoyed in recent weeks by trillions of dollars of stimulus and signs of a slowdown in the rate of virus infection and death in some countries—and moves to

slowly ease lockdown measures in a number of nations—are beginning to feel the spillover from the crude collapse.

Investors fear the rout could compound an expected deep global economic downturn. Innes added that the oil crisis "has negative connotations for other areas of the market, most notably banks, given their high exposure to US shale producers".

'Reality check'

Asian markets have struggled this week, though there were some recoveries yesterday. Tokyo ended down 0.7 percent while Singapore and Bangkok each shed 0.9 percent and Wellington retreated more than one percent. Manila also fell and Sydney was marginally lower. However, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Mumbai, Seoul and Taipei were all up along with Jakarta.

In early trade, London, Paris and Frankfurt all rallied. There was little reaction to the US Senate approving a near-half-trillion-dollar coronavirus relief package, with funding earmarked for small businesses, hospitals, and a ramp-up of testing nationwide. Adding to the sense of unease on trading floors is uncertainty around earnings season, with many firms struggling to provide forecasts as

they try to assess developments in the pandemic, which has shattered their bottom lines. "There's no way you can predict earnings right now," Michael Cuggino, at Pacific Heights Asset Management, told Bloomberg TV.

"It's virtually impossible until we have more visibility with respect to how the world comes out of the coronavirus on the other side." In Hong Kong, the de facto central bank stepped in to sell the local dollar for a second successive day to defend its peg with the US dollar.

The Hong Kong Monetary Authority sold HK\$2.79 billion (\$360 million) of the unit, which has strengthened in recent weeks owing to near-zero US interest rates and higher borrowing costs in the city as investors look to buy into its stock market. The move came a day after it sold HK\$1.55 billion, which marked the first intervention to offload the local unit since 2015. It last intervened to buy the currency in March last year. Under the city's Linked Exchange Rate System, the HKMA is required to buy the local currency at HK\$7.85 to US\$1 to ensure exchange rate stability. The financial hub has maintained a decades-old peg with the US dollar, which keeps Hong Kong at the mercy of Fed policy-makers. — AFP

Facebook invests \$5.7bn in Reliance digital platform

BENGALURU: Facebook will spend \$5.7 billion for 10 percent of Reliance Industries's digital business, as the social media firm looks to leverage its popular WhatsApp messenger to offer digital payment services to small grocers in India. The deal will help Reliance cut debt that has piled up in its push to secure top spot for its Jio Infocomm telco, and help boost its new online grocery marketplace JioMart.

India's online grocery market is lucrative but competitive, with Amazon.com's Pantry jostling for market share with Walmart's Flipkart and BigBasket, backed by China's Alibaba.

But a lot of untapped value lies in India's kirana stores, or small grocers, lifeblood of the country's \$375 billion grocery industry, according to data from the Retailers Association of India.

"In the near future JioMart ... and WhatsApp will empower nearly 30 million small Indian kirana shops to digitally transact with every customer in their neigh-

borhood," Mukesh Ambani, Reliance's billionaire CEO said in a video statement. WhatsApp has 400 million users in India, its biggest market. It has been trying to secure approval to roll out its digital payment service in India, to compete with the likes of Google Pay.

"Both Jio and Facebook want to tap feature phone users: both have been trying to tap payments and both want to increase grassroots adoption," said Tarun Pathak, associate director at Hong Kong-based Counterpoint Research. A marriage of JioMart and WhatsApp services will help reach grassroots users in India who shop from small stores, he said. Facebook's investment will make it the largest minority shareholder in Jio Platforms. Jio said yesterday, putting the enterprise value of the business at about \$66 billion. Jio Platforms holds a host of Reliance's digital assets including Jio Infocomm, which has become the country's largest telco within about three years of its launch. It has roughly 370 million subscribers.

Cutting debt

Reliance has also expanded its retail business as profits at its oil and chemical refining business have taken a hit. But expansion has caused its debt to surge to \$40 billion as of September. Reliance has said it wants to cut net debt to zero. "With crude prices where they are, the main oil and gas business



NAVI MUMBAI: Motorists ride past the Jio World Centre during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Navi Mumbai yesterday. — AFP

will be under pressure. (The Facebook deal) allows them to cut some debt, and also establish a valuation for the Jio business," said Rusmik Oza, executive vice president at Kotak Securities. Reliance is also set to sell stakes in its refining business to Saudi Aramco, and in its telecom tower assets to Brookfield. Last month, Financial Times reported that Facebook was in talks for a stake in Jio, but the talks were halted due amid the pandemic. — Reuters

UK inflation falls as shoppers turn cautious

LONDON: Britain's inflation rate dropped in March when oil prices tumbled and the coronavirus crisis escalated, official data showed yesterday, with a fall in clothing and footwear prices signalling how cautious shoppers were turning. In what is likely to be the start of a sharp decline in inflation, the consumer price index was 1.5 percent higher compared with March 2019, as a Reuters poll of economists had predicted, slowing from February's 1.7 percent rise.

A fall in clothing and footwear prices was the biggest drag on the index in March, the Office for National Statistics said. "Prices usually rise between February and March, and this year's fall is the first since 2015 and only the second since the start of the constructed (inflation) series in 1988," the ONS said.

Sales were likely to have been impacted by the coronavirus outbreak and retailers resorted to discounting more items on sale, reversing the usual pattern in March as new lines hit the shops, the ONS added. — Reuters

Business

For Ukrainian startup, COVID-19 means business is booming again

Surge in user numbers sees revenues increase some 20% in March

KIEV: The headquarters of Dmytro Voloshyn's startup in the historic center of Kiev is eerily quiet. But online, his business is busier than ever. Despite a crippling global economic crisis brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, Voloshyn believes a worldwide lockdown to slow infections was just what his startup needed to thrive.

"We are in a favorable position," the co-founder and chief technical officer of the Preply language learning platform said. "People are at home because of the virus, so they can spend more time on online learning." When Voloshyn, 32, and his two business partners founded their company in 2013, all of its tutors worked offline and lived in Ukraine.

Since, the platform which pairs language teachers with students, has moved online only with students and teachers across the globe. Helped by anti-virus measures restricting millions to their homes, Preply now has a network of 10,000 tutors in 190 countries and "tens of thousands of students", Voloshyn says.



Lockdown helps his startup thrive

says Voloshyn. He points to a global trend in which people "do nothing" in the first week of lockdown. But during the second week "we see a double or even triple growth in number of users." This surge saw revenues increase some 20 percent in March, he added. Hannah Iliina, 25, teaches Chinese and English on several platforms including Preply, from her home in Kiev's suburbs. She says now is the "perfect time" to be a tutor online. "I used to have free days or between one and two lessons per day. Now it's five or six per day, seven days a week."

One of her students, a Canadian, increased his weekly lessons from three to seven, she said. But not all Ukrainian startups have enjoyed the same success under lockdown.

In Kiev alone, between 200 and 300 IT specialists have recently lost their jobs, says Voloshyn. Ex-Soviet Ukraine with a population of 40 million

is one of the poorest countries in Europe. The economic fallout from the pandemic threatens to make matters worse.

'Growth will fade'

Ukraine's GDP is set to shrink by 5-10 percent this year, says Hlib Vyshlinsky, director of the Centre for Economic Strategy in Kiev. Aviation and tourism have already felt the pandemic's impact, he told AFP.

Vyshlinsky warns that Ukraine's tech sector, which employs 200,000 sought-after developers generating billions of dollars from local and international companies, will not be insulated from the shock. Voloshyn acknowledged his company was



KIEV: Ukrainian entrepreneur Dmytro Voloshyn, the co-founder and chief technical officer of the Preply language learning platform, puts a protective face mask as he leaves the empty office in Kiev. — AFP

riding a short term wave of success and predicts a drop in growth when countries begin easing lockdown restrictions.

"People will go out and want to have more offline activities," he said. Yet he expects the pandemic will contribute to company's long-term growth. "What quarantine will change is the perception of online learning. People will become much more open to online products," he said.

He hopes this will boost Preply's chances of

becoming a "unicorn"—a startup valued at more than \$1 billion—within three or four years. In late March, the company raised \$10 million, doubling funds raised in previous rounds.

But Voloshyn accepts his company isn't completely safe from the virus fallout.

If people run out of money they will not be able to afford everyday "basics", nevermind online education, he said. "That is a scenario everyone is afraid of." — AFP

Ooredoo announces registration for ProPing tournament

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, announced that registration is now opened for the second annual ProPing Online Gaming Tournament, in collaboration with Blink Kuwait, the professional Esport organizer, and leader in the PC & console gaming business in Kuwait. The tournament will take place virtually on April 26 and 27, and gaming enthusiasts wishing to participate can register by visiting <https://www.ooredoo.com.kw/portal/en/tournaments> and will be competing in the online game 'Call of Duty - Modern Warfare' from their homes. The tournament will consist of 32 teams made up to 128 players selected from an expected number of 1500 participants who will compete in side tournaments in a purely digital environment. Valuable prizes from Ooredoo, Blink and FASTteleco will be awarded to the winners who will be announced during the tournament.

In addition to the tournament, FASTtelco, a subsidiary of Ooredoo Kuwait and the only provider of ProPing; which is a tailored-made internet service for pro-gamers is launching exclusive new sets of Pro Gaming PCs and gaming accessories bundles in cooperation with Blink, which can be purchased through FASTtelco's customer service center at 1886666.

FASTtelco will also be providing Shamel Home ProPing packages starting at KD18 per month with tailor-made wireless and fixed internet bundle for pro-gamers, to provide an unparalleled gaming experience are available to be purchased through My Ooredoo App or the MyOoredoo application and the Company website Ooredoo.com.kw.

ProPing Online Gaming Tournament is aligned with the company's 'Be Safe. Be Home. Be Online' campaign, featuring an array of digital offers and services designed to support customers and to ensure they are well connected and informed during the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.

BP faces new existential challenges

LONDON: Ten years after an oil spill that BP's new boss Bernard Looney admits tested the company "to the core", the firm is facing two existential challenges: the collapse of prices and climate change.

It was a decade ago this week that an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico triggered the worst oil spill in US history, killing 11 employees and ultimately costing the British firm more than \$70 billion. Speaking in February as BP announced plans to go carbon neutral by 2050, chief executive officer Looney said that "we learned some hard lessons we will never forget".

"We remember those lessons in this new decade, where the big challenge for BP is the one the world faces: climate change," he said. Anglo-Dutch oil giant Royal Dutch Shell has followed suit in pledging to become carbon neutral but the US groups and French firm Total are lagging behind.

BP says it has reformed its culture over the past decade to emphasize operational security and to prevent environmental damage, for example

Virus-hit news industry seeks tech giant aid

LONDON: The main union representing journalists in Britain is calling on the government to triple a tax on global tech giants to support the industry, as it faces fresh shocks from the coronavirus outbreak. Sector analysts predict that as many as 5,000 journalists could lose their jobs without state intervention, as the national lockdown hits already declining print sales and dwindling advertising revenue. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) said urgent action was now needed, and the government should look to increase its new digital services tax on tech heavyweights to fund a wider, more long-term "news recovery plan".

"It has been estimated that the current proposals by the UK government could raise as much as £500 million (\$620 million, 570 million euros) in a year," NUJ assistant general secretary Seamus Dooley told AFP. "That's the two percent they plan. We're saying triple it. That would represent a sizeable immediate injection if treated as a windfall tax."

The digital services tax, which came into effect on April 1, targets search engines, social media services and online marketplaces of British users, provided the company's revenue is more than £25 million. It is expected to raise £280 million in its first year and £500 million by the end of 2025, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility.

The levy was introduced after controversy about foreign-based online platforms such as Google and Facebook, which generate huge advertising revenues in Britain but pay relatively little domestic tax.

"There's very much common cause between employers and owners that effectively these are platform providers that are eating our lunch," said Dooley. "They're reliant on the work of media organizations—of journalists, photographers and videographers—and the real challenge for media organizations who are dependent on commercial revenue has been the hemorrhaging of advertising to online."



In this file photo taken on June 14, 2010, crosses with descriptions of fish, wildlife and summer pastimes are displayed in a front yard of a home in Grand Isle, Louisiana, of things potentially lost to the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. — AFP

through a program to detect methane leaks. The company's latest figures show an increase in its oil spills from 124 in 2018 to 152 in 2019, but BP puts this down to acquisitions over the period. The 2020s began amid greater pressure on multinationals to reduce their carbon emissions, from investor demands to dramatic protests by climate campaigners.

The global coronavirus pandemic has brought a new and unprecedented challenge for oil firms,



LONDON: Britain's culture secretary Oliver Dowden has warned the news industry could lose £50 million during the crisis, particularly as big firms had blocked online ads alongside stories on COVID-19 — AFP

Layoffs and leave

Broadcasters such as the BBC have reported record audiences while websites have seen a surge in traffic since the start of the outbreak, and Britain's lockdown which began on March 24.

Ian Murray, executive director at the Society of Editors, said the apparent increase in trust in traditional media was "a very thin silver lining from a horrible dark cloud".

But there remains concern about the economic and social fall-out on journalists, including freelancers not covered by government rescue plans. Nearly 250 local newspaper titles closed between 2005 and 2018, and the current crisis has seen more than 2,000 mainly non-editorial staff at some 500 newspapers temporarily laid off, according to industry magazine Press Gazette.

Some companies are predicting multimillion-pound losses in revenue, have cut salaries or asked staff to work fewer hours and take unpaid leave. Others have announced mergers or warned they could close completely. Media research firm Enders Analysis has predicted advertising sales in the British press could fall by £330 million or 30 percent this year, and circulation could be cut in two. Britain's culture secretary Oliver Dowden has warned the news industry could lose £50 million during the crisis, particularly as big firms had blocked online ads alongside stories on COVID-19. — AFP

causing a drop in demand that has sent prices plummeting. The collapse in prices complicates the transition to cleaner energy for oil majors, because cheap oil makes green energy comparatively less attractive.

BP puts almost all of its \$15 billion annual investment budget into fossil fuels, although it has acquired stakes in solar panel firms and electric vehicle charging companies worth a total of \$400 million. "Their basic business model hasn't changed," said Bobby Banerjee, professor of management at City, University of London. "They invest most of their money in gas and oil" because "they're confident there will be demand for oil" in the next 50 to 70 years, he said.

He said for BP, the energy transition was all about shifting from oil to gas, which is still a polluting hydrocarbon. "The return they get on fossil fuels is not the return they'll get on renewables," he said.

Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell, said after the Deepwater crisis BP shed some assets and bet on low oil prices in the long run, reducing its costs and making the group more resilient.

But it has huge debts, totalling some \$45 billion at the end of 2019, leaving it vulnerable to a sustained drop in revenues. Looney now faces a dilemma. He must decarbonise the group while preserving its profitability and share price, which has fallen by 40 percent since the beginning of the year, a plunge experienced by many rivals. — AFP

Europe races to shield virus-hit companies

FRANKFURT: Fears that cash-rich corporate raiders could use the coronavirus crisis to swoop on weakened European firms were perhaps best exemplified by Donald Trump's alleged bid for a German biotech firm working on a vaccine. The outrage that followed has spurred fresh action by European Union nations to bolster their defenses against hostile takeovers that could see key technologies and know-how being lost to countries like China and the United States.

Although Germany's CureVac company denied last month's reports that Trump had offered a billion dollars for exclusive rights to any coronavirus vaccine, the furore nevertheless prompted Economy Minister Peter Altmaier to declare that "Germany is not for sale".

Days later, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen urged the bloc's 27 members to "use all options to protect critical European companies" from unwanted foreign takeovers at a time when many firms are hit hard by the pandemic-induced downturn. Some listed companies have seen their share price plummet as they grapple with the economic fallout, making them prime targets for bargain hunters, while previously-niche firms in health technology or medical research are catching investors' eyes.

The EU last year agreed regulations for screening foreign investments and although member states have until the autumn of 2020 to adjust their national laws, the coronavirus has given the matter fresh urgency. "Europe doesn't want to see takeovers of strategically important firms with key technologies or whose valuations are very low at the moment," said Ulrich Wolff, a partner at Linklaters in Frankfurt. Germany has been among the first to act, with ministers approving a draft law this month that makes it easier than before for Berlin to block a non-EU takeover of companies deemed strategically important. — AFP

Business

Cost of funding for GCC countries rose due to COVID-19: Markaz

Bond prices dropped in March 2020

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz", in its GCC Fixed Income research report for the first quarter of 2020, has highlighted the implications of the outbreak of COVID-19 on fixed income markets in the region. The report notes that the outbreak of the disease has significantly impacted global financial markets across all asset classes, pushing central banks and policymakers to intervene and provide wide-ranging economic stimulus measures in the face of worsening economic conditions. Within the global fixed income markets, the global pandemic event has resulted in elevated volatility and widened spreads. Aside from the pandemic, global markets witnessed a sharp drop in oil prices during March as well, placing further strain on oil-dependent economies, translating into further pressure on regional fixed income markets.



Implications of coronavirus

The implications of the pandemic on regional fixed income markets were manifold. Regional fixed income indices were down for the first quarter of the year, whereas key sectors in the GCC experienced large sell-offs of Bonds and Sukuk and elevated spreads. Primary issuances of Bonds and Sukuk in the GCC witnessed weak activity in March as a result of the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, leading to a meager quarter of primary debt issuances in 2020 in comparison with previous quarters. Moreover, Credit Default Swap (CDS) spreads, a measure largely regarded as an indicator of default for sovereign countries, spiked across all GCC countries during March. Finally, the pandemic event and the sharp decline in oil prices pushed credit rating agencies to downgrade both Kuwait and Oman on 31 March, citing deteriorating global economic outlook and falling oil prices.

Performance of fixed income indices

Initially, major leading global fixed income indices were up by the end of February, before witnessing sharp declines in March and wiping any gains for the year subsequent to the declaration of COVID-19 a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO).

By the end of February 2020, the Bloomberg Barclays Global Aggregate was up 2 percent. Similarly, the Bloomberg Barclays GCC Aggregate, an index representative of fixed income securities of the 6 countries that form the Gulf Cooperation Council, was up 1 percent. Moreover, the Bloomberg Barclays Emerging Markets Aggregate was up 1 percent, whereas the Bloomberg Barclays US Aggregate and Pan-European Aggregate indices were up 4 percent and 2 percent, respectively. However, during March, the Bloomberg Barclays Global Aggregate fell by 2 percent, therefore ending the first quarter of the year at 0 percent return. In comparison, the Bloomberg Barclays GCC Aggregate was down by 9 percent ending the first three months of the year at a loss of 7 percent, while the worst-performing index was the Bloomberg Barclays Emerging Markets Aggregate index which lost 11 percent in March, to end the first quarter of the year with a total loss of 9 percent. The Bloomberg Barclays US Aggregate index is the only index up for the year, posting a return of +3 percent for the quarter, whereas the Bloomberg Barclays Pan-European Aggregate lost 4 percent in March, recording a loss of 1 percent for the first quarter of the year.

Sector performance of GCC fixed income securities

With few exceptions, all GCC bonds and Sukuk across sectors were negatively impacted as a result of the disruption caused by the coronavirus outbreak and the sharp drop in oil prices, a major source of revenue for the GCC countries. Among these, high yielding bonds and longer maturities witnessed the biggest decline in each sector; however, Consumer (Non-Cyclical), Oil and Gas, Real Estate and low rated Government bonds experienced the brunt of the impact. NMC Healthcare, based in the UAE, experienced the steepest decline in its 2025 bond and saw prices fall by 90.14 percent in the first quarter of the year as reports of fraudulent financial reporting emerged indicating inflated asset purchases and capital expenditures as well as understated debt. Borr Drilling witnessed the sharpest decline in the Oil and Gas industry as its 2023 bond witnessed a 74.4 percent decline in value during Q1 2020. The Emirates REIT witnessed the sharpest decline year-to-date in the Real Estate Industry as the value of its 2022 bond declined by 33.9 percent. Among GCC Sovereign bonds, Oman experienced the greatest decline in prices across different maturities as low oil prices are

expected to strain the country's fiscal budget. As of Q1 2020, Oman's 2027 bond declined by 30.36 percent, 2029 bond declined by 31.07 percent and 2048 bond declined by 34.51 percent.

Primary issuances of GCC bonds and sukuk

During March 2020, the total primary issuances of Bonds and Sukuk in the GCC amounted to \$5.4 billion, representing a decline of 75 percent from the total primary issuances of \$21.5 billion achieved in March 2019. The decline in primary issuances represents a 4-year low and is largely as a result of the uncertainty surrounding the global pandemic event. During Q1-2020, primary issuances of Bonds and Sukuk in the GCC amounted to \$26.2 billion, compared to \$42.5 billion during the same period in 2019. This represents a decrease of 38 percent year-on-year.



Moreover, primary issuances by Sovereign GCC entities decreased by 65 percent year-on-year to reach \$10.94 billion during Q1-2020, compared to \$30.83 billion in Q1-2019. On the other hand, primary issuances by Corporate entities in the GCC increased by 31 percent year-on-year to reach \$15.30 billion during Q1-2020, compared to \$11.70 billion during the first quarter of 2019. However, the majority of Corporate issuances in the GCC during 2020 came in January and February, prior to declaring COVID-19 as a pandemic.

GCC CDS spreads

In March 2020, the 5-year CDS spreads have increased for all GCC countries reflecting a perception of higher credit for these countries. The halting of the global economy and the projected fall in future oil revenues are seen as adding further strain on the budgets of GCC governments, thus increasing the perceived risk of default. During March, Qatar saw its 5-year CDS spreads change from 49.010 bps to 128.745 bps, Abu Dhabi from 44.690 bps to 116.275 bps, and Dubai from 116.070 bps to 296.290 bps. Kuwait's 5-year CDS spread was priced at 41.735 bps at the beginning of March, which increased to reach 102.025 bps. Saudi Arabia's 5-year CDS spread was priced at 76.535 bps

and increased to reach 175.400 bps at the end of the month. Moreover, Bahrain saw its 5-year CDS spreads increase from 201.195 bps to 475.295 bps during March, whereas Oman's 5-year CDS increased by from 324.585 bps to 662.595 bps during the same period.

GCC yield curve

Bond prices have an inverse relationship with yields; as bond prices increase, yields decrease and vice versa. During Q1 2020, GCC sovereign curves shifted upwards in line with the added risk of the economic shutdowns posed by COVID-19 and fiscal budgetary pressures of low oil prices, indicating higher cost of funding for these countries. Saudi Arabia saw the yield on its 2025 bond widen by 75 bps to 3.19 percent during Q1 2020, and the 2050 bond widen by 64 bps to 4.54 percent. Similarly, Qatar saw the yield on its 2026 bond widen by 63 bps to 3.01 percent and the yield on the 2049 bond widen by 30 bps to 3.81 percent. Furthermore, the 2026 Abu Dhabi bond widened by 39 bps to 2.83 percent and the 2049 bond widened by 24 bps to 3.52 percent. Dubai saw its 2025 Dubai Sukuk widen by 85 bps to 3.23 percent and the 2043 Dubai bond widen by 154 bps to 5.83 percent. Bahrain and Oman experienced heightened volatility in terms of yield spreads as the yield on the 2026 Bahrain bond widened by 452 bps to 8.26 percent and the yield on 2047 Bahrain bond widened by 311 bps to 9.02 percent. As for Oman, the yield on its 2025 bond widened by 691 bps to 11.06 percent while the yield on the 2048 bond widened by 398 bps to 10.70 percent indicating markets are perceiving higher risks of defaults amid increasing economic turbulence. Kuwait's only outstanding bonds maturing in 2022 and 2027 widened by 3 bps and 26 bps as of Q1 2020, respectively. A comprehensive yield curve cannot be established for Kuwait due to the lack of government issuances.

GCC sovereign credit ratings

One of the more important implications of the outbreak of COVID-19 and decline in oil prices is the S&P's downgrade of Kuwait from AA to AA- with a stable outlook and Oman from BB to BB- with a negative outlook. Moreover, Moody's changed its outlook for both countries from Stable Outlook to Negative Outlook and has placed both countries on review for a potential downgrade. Fitch, however, affirmed Kuwait's credit rating at AA and maintained a stable outlook for the GCC country.

KIPCO's liquidity remains strong: Vice Chairman

KUWAIT: KIPCO - the Kuwait Projects Company (Holding) - has confirmed that it is on track to retire the \$500 million bond maturing in July 2020 out of existing resources, demonstrating its strong liquidity position. There will be no other KIPCO bond maturing for almost three years.

Noting the recent decision from S&P Global Ratings to downgrade KIPCO's senior unsecured bonds, the company said its credit profile continues to be solid. The S&P rating was last affirmed in early March 2020. However, following the global equity market sell-off driven by COVID-19, quoted market prices of KIPCO's key listed assets have declined, leading to an increase in the Loan to Value (LTV) ratio above the rating agency threshold. In particular, Burgan Bank's share price has declined by around 29% year to date (YTD), in line with other Kuwaiti banks (26 percent YTD). S&P also reduced its views on the valuation of two unlisted or thinly traded assets.



Faisal Al-Ayyar said

This global sell-off is an unprecedented event with markets driven by fear and uncertainty around COVID-19 and its short to medium term impact. KIPCO believes that current prices do not represent the intrinsic value of its portfolio companies. KIPCO owns fundamentally strong market leaders in their respective sectors and, in particular, Burgan Bank, Gulf Insurance Group and KAMCO Invest have

reported very good results for 2019. Furthermore, OSN's streaming platform was relaunched earlier this month, with thousands of customers joining the platform each week. Customers are enjoying the new content in the safety of their homes with fresh movies, series, family and kids content from Disney+, HBO, Nickelodeon and other major Hollywood studios. This comes as a result of OSN resetting its content rights with the studios along with securing the exclusive distribution rights for the entire MENA region across linear and digital platforms.

KIPCO's Vice Chairman (Executive), Faisal Al-Ayyar said: "One of KIPCO's strengths is its proactive management of liabilities, along with its strong liquidity position. In October 2019, the company refinanced its upcoming 2020 bond maturity in advance, thereby extending the average debt maturity. Once the July 2020 bond is repaid, there will be no debt maturing until March 2023. This structure is very supportive of the long-term nature of our investment strategy and provides us with runway to overcome any short to medium-term challenges such as COVID-19."



NEW YORK: An unprecedented crash in oil prices is adding pressure to already stressed US producers, threatening key shale regions and putting vulnerable companies at risk of going under.— Reuters

Oil crash means more misery for US shale producers

NEW YORK: An unprecedented crash in oil prices is adding pressure to already stressed US producers, threatening key shale regions and putting vulnerable companies at risk of going under. A day after US oil futures closed in negative territory for the first time ever, US President Donald Trump on Tuesday ordered his administration to come up with a plan to aid embattled producers, saying on Twitter, "We will never let the great US Oil & Gas Industry down."

But it was unclear exactly what further steps were available to Trump—who has already announced plans to buy oil off the glutted market to fill the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve—or whether any kind of additional aid would come in time for the industry. A proposal in Texas to mandate output cuts from producers remained in limbo after the Texas Railroad Commission Tuesday deferred a vote on the controversial measure until May, pending a review by the state's attorney general.

The commission's chairman, Wayne Christian, struck a defiant note at the outset of the meeting.

"While this is a dark time for our energy producers and our economy, I have no doubt that once this COVID 19 is rescinded and America is back to work, a rebound will occur," Christian said. "This is not going to be easy and it will not happen overnight. But Texans will rebuild this industry which has quite literally changed worldwide the power dynamics that surround energy policy."

In the meantime, "activity is in free fall in North America," Halliburton Chief Executive Jeffrey Allen Miller said Monday as he warned of layoffs in the face of an expected 50 percent decline in capital spending on exploration and production in North America in 2020. Larger industry players such as Exxon Mobil and Chevron have slashed their capital budgets, along with

mid-sized players, which have also taken an axe to their corporate dividends. The most vulnerable companies, though, are smaller players that have less access to capital. Interest rates on "B" rated five-year bonds, which are investment grade, are more than 25 percent, according to a note from CFRA Research.

"I think we are going to see more Chapter 11 filings," predicted CFRA analyst Stewart Glickman. "Who survives will be the firms with strong balance sheets. The ones that have too much debt are really going to have a problem."

Downgraded to deep junk

US oil's first-ever drop into negative territory on Monday was precipitated by the imminent expiration of the May contract, which punished traders who made bad bets at a time when there is almost no available free storage in the glutted market. US oil futures for May delivery were back in positive territory Tuesday, ending at \$10.01 a barrel. But in an ominous sign, futures for June delivery sank nearly 43 percent to \$11.57 a barrel. The petroleum industry has emerged as one of the most vulnerable cornerstones of the global economy as shutdowns to limit the spread of coronavirus have a devastating impact on demand for oil.

The commodity has been further weakened by a battle for market share that raged much of the spring between Saudi Arabia and Russia. Some analysts think a historic agreement last week by those two producers and other leading exporters could improve the supply-demand balance in the latter half of 2020. In the meantime, smaller companies are under pressure. These include shale producer Lonestar Resources, which is based in North Worth. S&P downgraded the company further into "junk" territory.

S&P's move followed the company's disclosure that it was out of compliance with its lending facilities. The company cautioned there is a risk it will be unable to reach agreement with lenders under a future default scenario, an outcome that would "create substantial doubt regarding our ability to continue as a going concern," Lonestar said in a filing last week.— AFP

Ships, trains, caves: Oil traders chase storage space

LONDON/NEW YORK: Oil traders are struggling to find enough ships, railcars, caverns and pipelines to store fuel as more conventional storage facilities fill up amid abundant supply and plummeting demand due to the coronavirus crisis. Dozens of oil tanker vessels have been booked in recent days to store at least 30 million barrels of jet fuel, gasoline and diesel at sea, acting as floating storage, as on-land tanks are full or already booked, according to traders and shipping data.

That adds to about 130 million barrels of crude already in floating storage, traders and shipping sources said. Demand for oil and its products has tumbled as much as 30 percent as governments around the world have told citizens to stay home to prevent the virus spreading - grounding planes and leaving cars parked up. But the world remains awash with oil supplies.

OPEC, Russia and other major producers have forged a deal to curb production, but it will only reduce supply by about 10 percent and it does not kick in until May. It is hard to gauge the world's total oil storage capacity, but signs that the limit is being reached are increasingly obvious. Rising sea storage is one indicator, as it is more expensive than storing onshore and can be technically complex.

Oil producers, refiners and traders are also turning to more unusual tactics, such as storing crude and fuel in railcars in northeastern United States or in unused pipelines. Europe's northwestern refining and storage hub still has space to fill but industry experts say most of the remaining capacity has already been booked. Salt caverns in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries were either full or fully booked. "We are now working on the most oddball storage locations, really tough locations where there are operational constraints," said Krien van Beek, a broker at ODIN - RVB Tank Storage Solutions in Rotterdam. The United States has some refined products storage space left in the area from the Midatlantic to the Southeast and along the Gulf Coast, said Ernie Barsamian, chief executive of The Tank Tiger, a US terminal storage clearinghouse.

But he said more preferable product storage sites, such as deepwater ports in New York Harbor and Houston, which are close to the demand centers, were no longer available. "The big tanks where you pull a ship in and empty the whole thing, that's all gone. What you have is pots and pans," he said.

In the United States, onshore storage tanks are mostly reserved for local refineries which are using railcars to store crude, as well as gasoline and diesel.

"Even the railcars are going to get stacked with product," said a US-based broker who asked to remain anonymous. In hubs with a little space left, such as Chicago, tank operators can charge a premium and longer leases. They have been demanding leases of 24-36 months rather than the more usual 12 months, according to two refined products brokers.

With the market oversupplied, oil prices have plunged to their lowest levels in two decades. This week, US Western Texas Intermediate made an unprecedented dive into negative territory, so sellers had to pay people to take it. Despite the plummeting crude price, some refineries which are able to find space can still make money producing fuel.— Reuters

Health & Science

Experts warn of oxygen shortages in poorer nations

PARIS: As the coronavirus pandemic bears down on vulnerable nations in Africa and South Asia, experts say there are only weeks to help fill chronic shortages of what medicines need to help people breathe.

Not ventilators, but oxygen itself. Medical oxygen is a core component of the life-saving therapies hospitals are giving patients with severe cases of COVID-19, as the world waits for scientists to find vaccines and treatments. The pandemic has pushed even the most advanced health systems to their limits, with concerns often focused on the supply of mechanical ventilators at the high-tech end of the breathing assistance spectrum.

But experts fear this has distorted the narrative about what constitutes an effective response, giving the wrong blueprint for nations with under-funded health systems.

"The reality is that oxygen is the only therapy that will save lives in Africa and Asia-Pacific now," said Hamish Graham, a consultant paediatrician and research fellow at Melbourne University Hospital and International Centre for Child Health. "I fear that undue focus on ventilators without fixing oxygen systems will kill." One report in February on thousands of cases in China's epidemic found that nearly 20 percent of patients with COVID-19 required oxygen. Of those, 14 percent needed some form of oxygen therapy, while a further five percent required mechanical ventilation.

In severe cases of COVID-19, the virus attacks the patient's lungs in the form of pneumonia, causing inflammation that prevents them from absorbing oxygen.

This can cause their blood oxygen levels to fall well below normal, a condition known as hypoxaemia that can deprive critical organs of oxygen and "substantially" increase the risk of death, Graham said.

"In hospitals in high-income countries, we take oxygen for granted," he told AFP.

"In low-resource settings, healthcare workers are acutely aware of the challenges as they fight to get oxygen to patients every day." Many larger hospitals across Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia will have some oxygen cylinders in operating theatres and wards, as well as concentrators—portable devices that filter and purify the surrounding air.

But surveys throughout Africa and Asia-Pacific have shown that less than half of hospitals have oxygen available on wards at any given time, Graham said, and even fewer have the pulse oximeters that allow medical staff to measure blood oxygen levels and guide dosages.

'Helpless'

Oxygen supply has long been a source of alarm among specialists who treat pneumonia, the world's biggest preventable infectious killer of children under five.

In Nigeria, one of the worst-affected countries, the government introduced a national policy several years ago to improve pneumonia treatment, but experts say it has not trickled down to a regional level. Adamu Isah, who leads Save the Children's work on pneumonia in the country, said the charity recently assessed primary healthcare facilities in two states and found that oxygen supplies were "really, really concerning". A former clinical physician, Isah said it was common to see children "suffering and gasping".

"If you don't have something like an oxygen system you find yourself helpless, there's really not much you can do," he told AFP. A 2018 report published by Every Breath Counts, a coalition of UN agencies, businesses, donors and aid agencies, said supplies of oxygen were "severely limited" in countries across South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

It cited surveys that suggested only one



AHMEDABAD, India: Doctors and nursing staff test a four-way multiplexer machine, which splits oxygen supply from a single ventilator to four patients through inspiratory limbs simultaneously, at the Institute of Kidney Diseases and Research Centre on April 20, 2020. — AFP

care beds—or, like Malawi, has got 25 beds for 17 million people—you can't flatten the curve to the extent that'll work," said Gwen Hines, Save the Children's executive director for global programs. Malawi, one of the poorest countries in Africa, has started to record cases of COVID-19, but a court last week temporarily blocked a government lockdown order. Hines said her organization has worked on providing solar powered concentrators to the country, which has intermittent electricity, no domestic oxygen plant, and often struggles to secure imports of medicines.

The mechanical ventilators used in well-funded health systems are the "wrong focus" for resource-poor countries, where they would have little impact, said David Lalloo, head of the Liverpool School for Tropical Medicine, which also has a large programme in Malawi.

He said the international community should instead prioritize oxygen supplies and protective equipment for health workers. Experts fear the international community may not act fast enough, as cases rise in Africa and Asia at the same time as Europe and the United States hit their peaks.

But Graham said it was also crucial for the response to be more strategic than "buying equipment and dumping it on hospitals", urging proper staff training and maintenance.

In Nigeria, Isah said his wish-list of equipment would start simple, with pulse oximeters, then oxygen concentrators that can be used in small healthcare settings, and finally higher-tech equipment like ventilators. But he said a "major fear" was competition in global supply chains for even basic devices. He called for "solidarity and collaboration" with richer nations helping those that are struggling to tackle COVID-19. — AFP

in 10 children with pneumonia in Nigeria received the oxygen they needed. In Ethiopia, research found that while 64 percent of hospital paediatric wards had oxygen supplies, only 14 percent had health workers trained to use them or standard operating procedures.

Leith Greenslade, the lead coordinator for Every Breath Counts, said the mining industry often has better oxygen supplies for its workers than under-funded hospitals. "These health systems in Africa and South Asia could not be more exposed to a pandemic like this one because they haven't been investing in respiratory therapy," she told AFP. "This is what terrifies me."

'Flying blind'

Despite pneumonia killing 800,000 children a year globally, campaigners say it has not been given the same attention as other infectious diseases like HIV, Malaria and TB. Greenslade said global health authorities

have also "completely neglected" oxygen, and this means there is very little information about supplies.

"The absence of global data on this is going to be a major problem trying to respond to COVID-19 because we are flying blind, we really don't know which countries are in more desperate need than the other," she said. The pandemic is still largely in its early stages in Africa and parts of Asia, giving the international community "probably a two-month window" to act, she added.

While it is still unclear how the new coronavirus will spread in poorer nations, there are acute fears over densely populated cities and refugee camps.

Experts say there is no one-size-fits-all approach, urging low income countries to go beyond lockdowns and urgently scale up basic health systems. "Like everywhere, flattening the curve is the idea, but if your health system doesn't have any intensive

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Lifestyle | Gossip



Grint praises midwife's 'Gryffindor behavior' amid coronavirus

Rupert Grint has thanked a midwife for her "Gryffindor behavior" during the coronavirus pandemic. The 31-year-old actor - whose girlfriend Georgia Groome is expecting the couple's first child - reached out to midwife Sam Halliwell to thank her for working on the frontlines of the health crisis in the UK, and likened her heroics to those often displayed by the members of the popular Hogwarts house from the 'Harry Potter' franchise. Rupert - who played Ron Weasley, a Gryffindor himself, in the hit movie series - told her during the 'One World: Together at Home' special in the UK: "Hearing your story is just insane. The sacrifices that you make is truly inspiring. It's very Gryffindor behavior. Thank you so much." The sweet

comment comes as Rupert's girlfriend Georgia will soon be calling on the skills of midwives when she welcomes her first child with the 'Cherrybomb' actor. Rupert's publicist confirmed earlier this month: "Rupert Grint and Georgia Groome are excited to announce they are expecting a baby and would please ask for privacy at this time." Meanwhile, Rupert - who largely keeps his relationship out of the spotlight - previously admitted he thinks fame can be "dehumanising". He shared: "It's almost like having a split personality. Sometimes it can be quite dehumanising to have people just taking pictures of you when you're out. To them, you are just this one thing. It's a weird existence. But that's my life. I can't really remember life before it. In a weird way, you

become blasé about it. It becomes normal and you adapt." Rupert starred in all of the 'Harry Potter' movies from 2001 until 2011. And even though he's not played Ron for years, fans continue to be fascinated by the films. He said: "I really did think it would die down after the first film finished and thought it was done. If anything, it's gone [the other way] as people hold those films very highly. I'm hearing stories about people who grew up with 'Harry Potter' a lot. I think it comes hand-in-hand with the people who literally shove cameras in your face. In a weird way, they feel ownership of you a little bit. We're quite familiar people in their lives."

Irwin 'happy and grateful' to be married to Powell

Bindi Irwin feels "so happy and grateful" to be married to Chandler Powell. The 21-year-old conservationist - who is the daughter of the late 'Crocodile Hunter' star Steve Irwin - tied the knot with Chandler last month, and has said that whilst times are "challenging" right now in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, she is pleased to be able to spend her self-isolation with her husband. Posting on Instagram alongside a series of pictures of herself and Chandler with one of Australia Zoo's lemurs, she wrote: "Lemur selfie! I wanted to take a moment to thank you for your incredibly kind comments and amazing support. Chandler and I are so happy and grateful to be married. Our honeymoon has been really busy with all that has to be done here @AustraliaZoo. "Due to the current pandemic we're temporarily not open and caring for our 1,200 beautiful animals that call our gardens home. Things are certainly challenging for us all at the moment. However, it's so important to focus on what really matters - family, friendship and things that make us smile even when we're social distancing." Meanwhile, Bindi previously spoke about her wedding ceremony - at which she had no guests, apart from her brother Robert Irwin and mother Terri Irwin, who live with her at Australia Zoo - as she explained she honoured her father's memory with a candle-lighting ceremony. Steve Irwin died in 2006 after he was attacked by a stingray while working on an underwater film, and his daughter kept his spirit alive in her wedding ceremony by holding the nuptials themselves in an area that was "special" to him. She explained: "Where we got married was such a special place to dad. It's a beautiful little area where he had filmed for many years. It felt really wonderful and just meant to be. "We had dad's picture with his dog Sui blown up on an easel. So mom and Robert were standing right next to dad as we exchanged vows. We had a candle-lighting ceremony for him, and it really felt like he was there with us. It was a lovely moment of peace and happiness."



Shane Lynch has split from his wife Sheena White

The Boyzone singer has revealed he and his spouse Sheena have separated after 13 years together, as they have been "at each other's throats" in recent weeks after being forced to spend more time together due to the coronavirus pandemic. Confirming he has moved out of his family home, he said: "We have had difficult times and are going through difficult times right now in this isolation thing. "I'm not even in my family home right now because me and her were at each other's throats. It wasn't a good time or a good space." Shane - who has daughters Billie, 11, and Marley, seven, with Sheena - has admitted the couple found it hard being confined inside during the global health crisis, as they had been so used to him being away on tour. He added: "I'm usually on the road and for the first time I've spent three months in my house. "All of a sudden I'm at home

a lot. You find out things about relationships and it can be very difficult. It can be a struggle." And although they've pressed pause on their romance for now, Shane - who married Sheena in 2007 - is "praying" they will reunite once the pandemic is over. Speaking to Paul Danan's 'Morning After' podcast, he said: "I'm praying every day me and my wife sort out our things and I get back to my kids. I pray the longer me and my wife are apart at this moment, during these difficult times, it builds a strongness so when we get back together life will continue to be amazing in the next 15, 20, 30 years. "But I don't know God's plan. Just because I love her and I love my children, does that mean there's something new for me in life? I don't know. I have to wait my time."

Jlo and Rodriguez discussing options for wedding plans

Jennifer Lopez and Alex Rodriguez have discussed "three or four" options for their wedding plans amid the coronavirus pandemic. The loved up couple - who got engaged in March last year - have had professional and personal plans rocked by the ongoing health crisis, and the retired baseball star admitted they have held talks with their representatives to figure everything out. He told 'Entertainment Tonight': "We had a meeting on Zoom with our core [group of people], kind of just going over what the next 12 months look like and we have three or four different variations of



how that can look." The 44-year-old star revealed the remote meeting discussed everything from wedding plans to work projects like "going on tour next summer" and even potential movie plans. A-Rod added: "It's such a fluid world. Usually when you underwrite a year - whether [in terms of] scheduling or financially - you never think that it's going to just stop like this. "So we're having to be very fluid, think on our feet and just think very proactively... At the same time, I think the most important thing for everybody is to practice great discipline and stay at home. "We have to do this together and every person counts. The way we're going to beat this thing is together." Alex and his daughters - Natasha, 15, and 12-year-old Ella - and currently self-isolating with J-Lo, 50, and her 12-year-old twins Emme and Max, and they family are glad to be spending time together at home. He said: "I'm actually thrilled to be home, because I'm never home, so I'm making the best out of it. "We're playing wiffle ball, we're playing chess, we're playing checkers, we're playing Monopoly, and for us to have dinner with the kids every day is like a dream."

Marvin and Rochelle Humes are having a baby boy

The couple announced the happy news they are to become parents for the third time over Easter, and now they've revealed the sex of the unborn tot by posting a video clip of their daughters Alaia-Mai, six, and Valentina Raine, three, learning the news. In a sweet video of the girls on an Easter egg hunt, they are given a note from the Easter Bunny, which Alaia-Mai reads out. It says: "Hippity hippity hop, I have great news that I have to drop. "You and Valentina are such good sisters but now it's time to add someone new to the mixture. "Now that's all from me, the Easter Bunny, the BIG news is you have a baby brother inside Mummy's Tummy!" The 35-year-old JLS star's eldest girl had a big smile on her face as she read the line about the baby and her dad then picked her up, and told her: "You're going to be a big sister again!" She then said: "You're having a baby, a baby boy." Rochelle then asked their youngest girl: "What's in my belly?", to which she replied: "A baby brother". The 31-year-old beauty captioned the post on Instagram: "It was an odd Easter but we found some magic in the chaos. "The Easter Bunny dropped by and sent Marv some back up #AnEasterWeWillNeverForget" (sic) Whilst Marvin admitted he is "over the moon" and made a quip about having "back-up" now there will be another man in the house. He wrote on his own page: "Finally I have some back up! We're having a baby boy!!! Over the moon (sic)", along with a blue heart emoji. The pair first announced their pregnancy news on Easter Sunday, when Rochelle posted a bunny and pregnant lady emoji, and shared on Twitter: "There's a baby bunny in my oven ... (sic) Whilst Marvin shared the same picture - which featured a sign that read "We're eggspecting Baby Humes, October 2020," - and captioned it: "And there's another Bunny in the oven! Baby Humes due Oct 2020 ... our hearts are so full we are truly blessed ... (sic)"



Jonas and Turner donate 100 meals to LA hospital

Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner have sent 100 meals to healthcare workers in Los Angeles amid the coronavirus pandemic. The Jonas Brothers singer and the 'Game of Thrones' star - who is expecting the couple's first child - have reached out to help those working directly to help save lives amid the global health crisis, by donating 100 hot meals. Joe and Sophie sent the meals to East Los Angeles Doctors Hospital as part of the Fuelling the Fearless campaign, which works to hire local restaurants struggling to make ends meet as a result of the crisis. The news was confirmed by Fuelling the Fearless on their Instagram account, where they thanked the couple for their contributions, as well as the Jonas Brothers' manager Phil McIntyre and wife Shonda McIntyre. They wrote: "A BIG THANK YOU to @joejonas @sophiet @philymack @shondamcintyre for donating 100 meals to East LA Doctors Hospital. "This hospital is in the heart of downtown LA and serves a vastly underprivileged community with limited resources and support. The staff work tirelessly to care for the community and those often forgotten. Through these type of fully paid sponsorships @alikiisgreektaaverna and her donors bring a moment of relief to a most grateful staff. One hot meal lets them know we are all in this together. "So again, thank you @joejonas @sophiet @philymack @shondamcintyre for taking care of LA nurses and doctors. #eastla #healthcareheroes (sic)" The kind deed comes after other stars have also been donating to the cause, as Miley Cyrus and her boyfriend Cody Simpson recently shared tacos with a local hospital. Several celebrities have given monetary donations to charities aiming to provide relief and fund cure research, whilst some have opted to directly help in the manufacturing of vital supplies such as Kylie Jenner and her skincare brand Kylie Skin, which confirmed recently it would begin making and distributing hand sanitisers to hospital workers around California.

Khloe Kardashian insisted 'dark times teach you a lot'

The 35-year-old reality star - who is currently self-isolating with her ex-boyfriend Tristan Thompson and their two-year-old daughter True - has shared a cryptic post on social media amid the coronavirus pandemic. Feeling reflective, she shared: "Dark times teach you a lot. That's why you can't regret what you went through, but rather be thankful for all the lessons it taught you." Another tweet seemingly urged her followers to remain kind during such a difficult time. She added: "Stay gentle, everyone is at war." Khloe's post comes days after reports the former flames are "half serious and half joking" about having another child

together. The 'Revenge Body' star split from the 29-year-old basketball player over a year ago but he thinks True "needs a sibling" and she has insisted the only way they will have a second baby together would be through artificial insemination. A source recently said: "Khloe wanted to become a mom for years before she got pregnant with True. Being a mom is even more precious than she could have ever imagined. She just loves it all. "She absolutely wants a sibling for True. Tristan seems to be on the same page and would like a sibling for True as well. "Although being co-parents instead of being together is not the ultimate situation in Khloe's mind, she is very happy

about how she and Tristan are raising True. And now with the lockdown, Tristan has been in L.A. for weeks. He and True are spending more time than ever together. Khloe is very happy about it." During a recent episode of 'Keeping Up With The Kardashians' the pair discussed the possibility of having another baby. She said: "I might get some embryos and get a sibling. I might need to borrow some sperm or get some from you...we'll figure that out later. That's a whole other episode." —Bang Showbiz



Lifestyle | Features



A Palestinian man wearing a coronavirus costume sewed by his sister plays with a girl in the central Gaza Strip amid the COVID-19 pandemic on April 20, 2020.—AFP

Young guitarist enchants locked down Rome

The melodic theme music from "Cinema Paradiso" soars over a completely still and silent Rome every sunset. It provides an enchanting end to surreal days in lockdown living through a pandemic that has claimed over 22,000 lives in Italy and 145,000 worldwide. The 18-year-old guitarist behind the performances has turned into a social media star for his impromptu covers of Ennio Morricone classics. He plays from the terrace of his luxurious flat overlooking the fountains of Rome's now-empty Piazza Navona. The Vatican's dome stands to the left of the setting sun and the sea gulls flutter overhead as he plays. "We decided to lend a hand to Italians: a message of hope," Jacopo Mastrangelo tells AFP from his patio.



Jacopo Mastrangelo plays the guitar from his terrace overlooking Piazza Navona in Rome.—AFP

"We are accustomed to always seeing Rome full, teeming with people. Now the grass is growing between the cobblestones, everything has been left abandoned, and we decided to help," Mastrangelo's father is a senior accountant and the teenager lives an admittedly privileged life in one of Rome's most exclusive neighborhoods. The Rome mayor heard about the teen and invited him to play a special Easter Sunday performance from the hilltop Piazza del Campidoglio that rises above the Forum.

"He moved us when he played from his terrace overlooking Piazza Navona," Raggi said in her introduction to his Easter concert. "Today, from Rome, we

want to pay homage to Romans, Italians and the whole world." Mastrangelo said the mayor phoned him up one day and they agreed that he would perform three songs. "I was nervous. Because it's one thing to play here with my father, like it's my hobby, and quite another when it's the mayor looking straight into my eyes," he recalls. "I was stressed." He says that he still worries about his high school exams this year — but his sudden popularity does not hurt. "Nothing is impossible now, with this popularity," he says. "I did not expect it. Everything happened very quickly."

Indonesia locks virus violators in 'haunted house'

Fed up with people breaking virus quarantine rules, one Indonesian politician has decided to scare rulebreakers straight by locking them in a "haunted house". Sragen regency head Kusdinan Untung Yuni Sukowati says she issued the unusual edict this week to deal with an influx of people to the area after lockdowns in the capital Jakarta and other major cities. Some newcomers, however, weren't respecting orders that they isolate themselves for 14 days to prevent the spread of coronavirus across the region on Indonesia's densely populated Java island. So Sukowati instructed communities to repurpose abandoned houses that were feared to be haunted — tapping widespread beliefs in the supernatural, which play a key role in Indonesian folklore.

Five people have been tossed into Sragen's spooky jails so far. "If there's an empty and haunted house in the village, put people in there and lock them up," Sukowati told AFP Tuesday when asked about the rule. Officials in Sepat village chose a long-abandoned house and outfitted it with beds placed at a distance and separated by curtains. So far, the village has locked up three recently-arrived residents who are being forced to spend the remainder of their two-week quarantine in the spooky abode. Among them was Heri Susanto, who said his punishment hadn't brought him face to face with any ghosts — so far. "But whatever happens, happens," said Susanto, who came from neighboring Sumatra island. "I know this is for everyone's safety. Lesson learned."—AFP

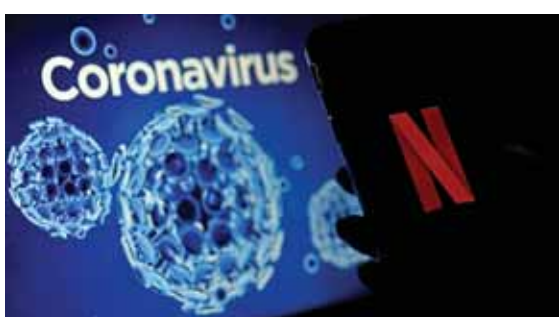


A volunteer keeps watch at a quarantine facility, a repurposed abandoned house believed by some locals to be haunted.—AFP

Netflix profits soar as pandemic shut-ins sign up

Netflix on Tuesday reported its quarterly profit more than doubled as subscriptions surged at the streaming television service during the pandemic. Netflix made a profit of \$709 million on revenue of \$5.8 billion in the first three months of this year, while the number of subscribers grew by 15.7 million to total nearly 183 million, according to earnings figures.

The California-based company said that the long term effects of huge job losses due to the coronavirus crisis on Netflix revenue remained unclear. "In our 20+ year history, we have never seen a future more uncertain or unsettling," executives said in a letter to investors.—AFP



In this file photo illustration a mobile phone screen displays the Netflix logo next to a coronavirus, COVID-19, illustration graphic background in Arlington, Virginia.—AFP

Queen Elizabeth II marks 94th birthday with no fanfare

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her 94th birthday on Tuesday, but the traditional gun salute was called off this year because of the coronavirus crisis. The monarch was said to be marking the occasion with her 98-year-old husband, Prince Philip, at Windsor Castle, west of London. The couple, whose age puts them in a high-risk category for COVID-19, have been following the government's lockdown orders and maintaining social distancing rules during the pandemic. Other senior royals have

been housebound at their residences around Britain, so publicly wished the queen a happy birthday on social media instead.

"Wishing Her Majesty The Queen a very Happy 94th Birthday," her son and heir to the throne Prince Charles and his wife Camilla posted on Twitter alongside a selection of photographs of his mother through the decades. Buckingham Palace said on Saturday that the queen would not celebrate her birthday with a traditional gun salute given Britain's struggles to contain

COVID-19. The country is among the worst-hit in the world by the virus, registering nearly 17,000 deaths in hospitals and almost 125,000 cases to date. "Her Majesty was keen that no special measures were put in place to allow gun salutes as she did not feel it appropriate in the current circumstances," the palace said. The monarch made a rare national address at Easter, urging a collective response to the outbreak.—AFP



In this file photo taken on April 21, 2017 The Honourable Artillery Company fire a 62-gun salute against a backdrop of London's Tower Bridge, as Britain's Queen Elizabeth II celebrates her 91st birthday.—AFP photos



In this file photo taken on October 11, 2019 Britain's Queen Elizabeth II reacts as she visits the Haig Housing Trust in Morden, southwest London, to open their new veteran housing development.

Josh Brolin apologizes for visiting dad and Barbra Streisand

Josh Brolin has apologised for breaking California's strict stay at home orders to visit his dad James Brolin and stepmother Barbra Streisand. The 'Avengers: Endgame' star received criticism online last week when he and his wife Kathryn Boyd took their daughter Westlyn Reign to visit her grandparents, despite the social distancing and self-isolation rules that have been put in place amid the coronavirus pandemic. And in an Instagram video, the 52-year-old actor has now admitted his actions were "irresponsible". He said in the clip: "My father lives next door to us and we had a plan to go see them and not be near them and that plan was broken and that is our responsibility. We were going to pick something up and show Bean the pool and and I think it was irresponsible."



"It's hard to be honest sometimes, it's hard to be honest and say, 'Well maybe I screwed up.' The responses brought me back to my own truth. It's humbling as hell, because I know there are some people out there with no masks, no gloves, no interest in it, they think it's in your head, that you'll survive because of immunity that is created because of your own psychic weight. But I know for me that's not the case and we've been very responsible and I apologize about that."

Josh then insisted he is "not an advocate" for breaking quarantine rules "outside of taking care of each other". He added: "My apologies, and I'm not an advocate of doing anything outside of taking care of each other and making sure we get through this even if we go overboard and are too protective. We'll look back on this as being a short time for a very long term solution and a long life."— Bang Showbiz

Russia's Hermitage Museum calls for state support

The head of Russia's renowned Hermitage Museum said on Tuesday the government should ensure the survival of museums which are struggling during a coronavirus lockdown. Since the introduction of a ban on gatherings of more than 50 people in mid-March, museums across Russia have gradually closed their doors to the public. President Vladimir Putin then declared April a non-working month, encouraging Russians to stay home to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Hermitage chief Mikhail Piotrovsky said the museum had already lost half of its annual budget and was now in talks with the government in the hope to secure financial aid. "The state must ensure the survival of culture," Piotrovsky said during an online news conference. The museum earned 2.5 billion rubles (\$32 million) in 2018. Piotrovsky said that once the lockdown is over the

museum would need about a month to prepare for a re-opening. The museum was founded in 1764 under Empress Catherine the Great and features more than three million works of art and world culture artefacts. Nearly five million people visited the Hermitage last year.

Since the beginning of the lockdown, the museum has been organizing virtual tours which have become very popular with art lovers. Piotrovsky said museum staff also kept feeding its "famous" cats that live there and hunt for mice and rats. Cats first found a home at the Hermitage long before it became a museum open to the public in the 1850s. They are now hugely popular with tourists who snap up souvenirs and postcards adorned with cat pictures on sale in the museum's shops.—AFP



Turkish mosque turned into temporary 'supermarket'

ISTANBUL: At the entrance of an Istanbul mosque, the racks usually reserved for the shoes of the faithful are loaded with pasta packages, oil bottles, biscuits - like a supermarket. But they aren't for sale. Instead they are destined for the needy, hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic. The sign on the mosque's window asks anyone who can to leave something, and says those in need can take something.

Abdulsamet Cakir, 33, imam of the Dedeman mosque in the Sariyer district, came up with this idea of reaching out to the poor via the place of worship after Turkey suspended mass prayers in mosques until the risk of outbreak passes. Turkey's official death toll from the virus now stands at 2,259 after 119 more deaths were reported on Tuesday, and major cities including Istanbul will be under lockdown for four days from today.

"After the suspension of mass prayers, I had an idea to revive our mosque by bringing together well-off people with the people in need," Cakir told AFP inside the mosque, where bags of food and cleaning products were piled up on the floor. The young imam, who takes the products from the floor and places them on the shelves at the entrance, said he was inspired by a donation culture in the Ottoman period called "charity stone" - a small pillar stone erected at certain locations of the city to connect rich people with the poor.

'Tough situation'

In this Ottoman system aimed at giving charity in a dignified manner without offending the needy, people with means would leave whatever amount they wanted in a cavity on the top of the charity stone. Those who were in need would

then take the amount they needed and leave the rest for others. "After the coronavirus pandemic, we have thought about what we can do to help our brothers in need," said Cakir, who would already help the poor in his neighborhood before the outbreak. "With the inspiration from our ancestors' 'charity stone' culture, we decided to fill the racks in our mosque with the help from our brothers with means," he added.

Cakir hangs a list on the wall of the mosque where citizens who need help write their names and telephone numbers. The imam later sends the list to local authorities who check whether the names are really in need and his team then sends a message that they can visit the mosque and receive whatever they need: Eight items at maximum. "I am really in dire need. My husband doesn't work. I used to clean houses but since the virus, they no longer call," Guleser Ocak, 50, told AFP. "I wrote my name on the list before. I received a message today to pick up aid," she said. "We are in a tough situation."

'No cash'

The mosque has been providing services for two weeks and reaches out to 120 people in need per day. And the list includes over 900 people. A maximum of two people wearing masks and gloves enter the mosque and take what they need, while others wait outside, standing a few paces from each other. "We spread the services through the day. We call 15 people for each half an hour, so that we respect social distancing and do not cause big queues," the imam said. "We are doing our best to help our sisters and brothers in the best possible way without offending them,"



ISTANBUL: People take their need of food on Tuesday from Dedeman Mosque in the Sariyer district after Turkey suspended mass prayers in mosques until the risk of the COVID-19 outbreak passes. — AFP

he added.

The mosque does not accept cash donations and instead receives aid packages. "Producers also donate. A miller brings in flour, a baker brings in bread, a water distributor brings in water," Cakir said. The mosque's shelves are full of

products sent from all over Turkey and even abroad. "Everyone does whatever they can to help people in need. For example, a brother who lives in France did online shopping and directed the aid to our mosque," he said.

"What the mosque is doing is really,

really good for us. Ramadan is coming," said Duygu Kesimoglu, 29, referring to the Muslim fasting month beginning this week. "I am unfortunately jobless, they don't employ us because of the coronavirus. No job, no money. This help is very, very good," she said. — AFP

Iran says military satellite launched amid US tensions

TEHRAN: Iran's Revolutionary Guards announced they had successfully launched the country's first military satellite yesterday, at a time of fresh tensions with US forces in the Gulf. The United States alleges Iran's satellite program is a cover for its development of missiles, while the Islamic republic has previously insisted its aerospace activities comply with its international obligations. Tensions between the arch foes escalated last week with the US Department of Defense accusing Iranian vessels of harassing its ships in the Gulf.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps hailed the surprise satellite launch as a "great success". "The first satellite of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been successfully launched into orbit by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," said the Guards' Sepahnews website. It said the satellite - dubbed the Nour - had been launched from the Qassed two-stage launcher from the Markazi desert, a vast expanse in Iran's central plateau.

The satellite "orbited the earth at 425 kilometers," said the website. "This action will be a great success and a new development in the field of space for Islamic Iran," it added. The operation comes more than two months after Iran launched but failed to put into orbit another satellite that it said had no

military purpose. The attempted launch on Feb 9 of the Zafar - "Victory" in Persian - came days before the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Arch enemies Iran and the United States have appeared to be on the brink of an all-out confrontation twice in the past year.

Long-standing acrimony between Tehran and Washington was exacerbated in 2018 when US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from a deal that froze Iran's nuclear program, before issuing new demands that Tehran curtail its development of ballistic missiles. Tensions have escalated since the US killed Major General Qasem Soleimani, head of the Guards' foreign operations arm, the Quds Force, in a drone strike in January.

Washington has also raised concerns in the past about Tehran's satellite program, saying the launch of a carrier rocket in January 2019 amounted to a violation of limits on its ballistic missiles. Iran maintains it has no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons, and says its aerospace activities are peaceful and comply with a UN Security Council resolution. The Islamic republic, whose novel coronavirus outbreak is one of the world's deadliest, accuses the US of "economic terrorism" over the sanctions.

It says the punitive measures have denied it access to the medicines and medical equipment it needs to fight the virus that causes the COVID-19 disease. Iran says the virus has claimed the lives of nearly 5,300 people and infected almost 85,000 since the outbreak emerged on Feb 19. The number of Iranians killed and sickened by the virus is widely thought to be much higher, however. — AFP

of the contagious disease means that burial or cremation has to take place immediately.

In Saudi Arabia, according to a source in the health ministry who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity, "until now all the families are asking to bury the bodies inside Saudi because they prefer so". Among them was Wazir Moahmed Saleh, a 57-year-old Afghan who worked and lived in the Muslim holy city of Madinah since the 1980s after he fled his country during the war with the former Soviet Union. The stationery shop owner died of coronavirus last week.

He had family in the holy city where the Prophet's (PBUH) grave is located, but had to be buried with only four people in attendance - all his sons. His nephew Amed Khan, a sales agent born in the kingdom, could only look at photos and videos of his uncle's burial on a smartphone. "His dream was to be buried in Madinah, and his dream came true," he told AFP. "There isn't a person who dies in Madinah and would want to be buried elsewhere. This land is known to be part of heaven."

At the Hindu cremation facility in Dubai, not all coronavirus-related deaths have the name of the virus on their certificates. Vijay, an Indian national, said his 45-year-old brother Ram died of a heart attack after he sank into a severe depression during a 14-day quarantine following a direct contact with someone who had the virus. Standing near the body in the cremation room, under a white ceiling fan, four of his colleagues spread flowers on the body before it was reduced to ashes.

"Ram tested negative after he stayed in a room for two weeks. He was mentally hurt and he got depressed because he stayed alone," Vijay explained. The laundry worker and father of three died in an ambulance while he was being taken to hospital after suffering severe chest pain. "We are going back tomorrow to collect the ashes. We will send them home once the flights are back," his brother said. — AFP

Lebanon legalizes medical marijuana amid coronavirus

BEIRUT: Lebanon's parliament voted to legalize growing marijuana for medical use on Tuesday, amid an economic crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The lawmakers met in a 1,000 seat conference hall to maintain appropriate social distancing, while outside anti-government protesters demonstrated in a vehicle convoy. As the country struggles with a battered economy, MPs also approved the re-allocation of \$40 million from a World Bank loan to help fight COVID-19, which has officially infected 677 people and killed 21 nationwide.

Outside the venue, dozens of demonstrators sought to revive a massive anti-government protest movement that had rocked Lebanon from October, before the virus forced a nationwide shutdown. They drove a noisy convoy of cars covered in slogans, drivers honking their horns and passengers brandishing the national flag and leaning out of the windows - while wearing face masks.

Another item on the agenda of the three-day session were proposals for a divisive general amnesty, but that motion was sent back for revision by a parliamentary committee. "Today, instead of passing a general amnesty law... they could pass a law on the independence of the judiciary," said Jad Assaileh, a young demonstrator. "We want to recover the stolen money," he said, referring to allegations that Lebanon's ruling elite transferred billions out of the country while regular citizens were prevented from withdrawing their savings by the banks.

Similar protests took place in the cities of Sidon and Tripoli. The vote to legalize the growing of cannabis for medical use was aimed at boosting revenues for the crippled economy. Lebanon previously banned growing, selling and consuming cannabis, but illicit production in the country's east has developed over decades into a multi-million-dollar industry. Lawmakers also passed a law to fight corruption in the public sector and set up a national body in charge of stamping out graft.

Discord over amnesty plan

The proposal for a general amnesty to free thousands of detainees and to suspend arrest warrants for thousands more remains a contentious issue. Supporters - which include Shiite movements

Hezbollah and Amal as well as the Sunni Future Movement - say an amnesty could lessen overcrowding in jails housing 9,000 prisoners. But its detractors, including the president's Christian parliamentary bloc, say the bill is merely an attempt to boost popular support.

The amnesty has long been a demand of the families of some 1,200 so-called "Islamist detainees", most of whom hail from the Sunni-majority city of Tripoli, where the former premier's Future Movement is dominant. They are accused of carrying out crimes including fighting and assaulting the army, taking part in clashes in the city, and planning explosives attacks.

Families have also clamored for the release of thousands more detainees from the eastern regions of Baalbek and Hermel, where Hezbollah and the parliament speaker's Amal Movement are powerful. Most of these are accused of drug-linked crimes including growing hashish illegally, or other offences such as stealing cars.

No dollars

Lebanon's worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war is now compounded by the lockdown. Poverty has risen to 45 percent of the population, according to official estimates. Protests had petered out after a new government took office in January, and demonstrators have largely remained at home since the coronavirus lockdown started mid-March. But on Friday, hundreds again protested in Tripoli to mark six months since the street movement started to demand an overhaul of a ruling class widely deemed inept and corrupt.

One of the most indebted countries in the world with a debt equivalent to 170 percent of its GDP, Lebanon defaulted on payments for the first time last month. As the country faces an acute liquidity crisis, banks have banned transfers abroad and gradually restricted dollar withdrawals until suspending them last month. The Lebanese pound has for decades been pegged to the dollar, but in recent months lost half of its official value on the black market.

The official exchange rate remains 1,507 Lebanese pounds to the dollar. The banks earlier this month set their rate at 2,600 pounds to the dollar, but money changers were offering more than 3,200 pounds for the greenback on Tuesday on the black market. On Tuesday, the central bank asked banks to allow depositors with foreign currency accounts to withdraw their savings in Lebanese pounds at the "market rate", likely to signify 2,600 pounds to the dollar. — AFP

No last goodbye for Gulf workers...

Continued from Page 1

But a death from coronavirus means that the body cannot be sent home, and that it has to be cremated or buried in the country where the person dies.

"The whole world is changing. Nobody comes anymore, nobody touches, nobody says goodbye," said Ishwar Kumar, a manager of the Hindu Cremation Ground located in a desert area south of Dubai. Before coronavirus "people would come here, around 200 to 250, to grieve and bring flowers. Now they die alone," he told AFP. The majority of the 166 deaths and 26,600 registered cases in Gulf countries so far have been foreigners, according to health ministries, most of them from Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and the Philippines.

A few hours before the cremation of the Indian man - aged in his 50s and a partner at a tourist company in Dubai - the body of another victim, a 40-year-old Filipino beautician, was also cremated at the facility. Both had one thing in common on their death certificates - "covid pneumonia" as the cause of death. The silver boxes, bought from a hypermarket, are handed over to the next of kin if they are in Dubai, or to the embassy.

"They work as laborers so most of them don't have family members. Sometimes their work colleagues come," said Suresh Galani, another manager at the facility. Despite halting commercial flights to stop the spread of the pandemic, governments in the region have been trying to lay on repatriation flights for foreign workers who are now out of a job as the economy grinds to a halt. But dealing with victims' bodies is another challenge, as the presence

Call to halt loans, recruitment...

Continued from Page 1

the coronavirus. The committee also asked the bureau to include any other opinions pertinent to the report, in addition to its recommendations.

The budgets committee meanwhile pointed out that the state budget deficit for the current 2020/2021 fiscal year which began April 1 is expected to soar to KD 20 billion if spending remains intact in light of the sharp drop in oil prices, more than twice the deficit projected in the original budget prepared before the coronavirus outbreak. The committee however informed the government

that around KD 5 billion in deficit could still be posted in the fiscal year if spending is limited only to paying wages and related expenditures.

Kuwait has calculated oil revenues on the basis of an oil price of \$50 a barrel, a daily production of 2.7 million barrels per day and a dollar exchange rate of 305 fils to the dollar. But all these three variables deteriorated during the coronavirus pandemic. Oil is trading at around \$15 a barrel, Kuwait's production is under \$2.2 million bpd and the dollar is now equal to 310 fils.

Meanwhile, the Central Tenders Committee has approved contracts with two companies worth KD 28 million to import 300 million facemasks amid media reports that there is some shortage of masks. The committee also approved other contracts worth some KD 3 million to purchase medical equipment for the ministry of health.

Stars

Daily SuDoku

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

very hard

Yesterday's Solution

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

medium

STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)

This is a day to stay close to home and organize the house. You might be thinking how you can best utilize your living space. It's clear that some improvements are in order, Aries. Perhaps you could begin by tackling all those minor repairs that you've been putting off. Once those are done, a fresh coat of paint will do wonders to brighten both your home and your outlook.

Libra (September 23-October 22)

You feel invincible, Libra, as though you can do anything. Enjoy this abundance of energy, for it's certainly unusual. Take care not to overdo it. If you haven't jogged in a while, running five miles today will leave you pretty sore tomorrow. Similarly, don't try to finish all your household repairs in one day. Remember that slow and easy wins the race and keeps you in shape for the long haul!

Taurus (April 20-May 20)

You need rest, Taurus. Even though you have a long list of tasks, see if you can leave some for later. All signs indicate that you shouldn't stray too far from home today if you can help it. You're easily distracted, which makes you prone to accidents. Being behind the wheel of a car isn't the place for you right now. Stay home and tackle all those little chores you've been meaning to finish.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

This would be a good day to putter about the house, Scorpio. It isn't a good day to travel or begin any major projects. This could be just the excuse you've needed for taking a day off from your life! You need not answer the phone or fulfill any obligations whatsoever. Simply stay put and tackle some minor household chores. If even that proves too much, then curl up with some tea and a good book.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)

You're on your own when it comes to financial matters, Gemini. This may not be what you want to hear, but it's how things are. Trust that your business acumen will pull you through. Don't take anything at face value. Pay attention, write down the information, but make no commitments and sign no contracts. The environment isn't right for any deals. If a deal is valid today, it will still be valid tomorrow.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

This isn't the best day for get-togethers, Sagittarius. What starts as a friendly lunch could wind up a gossip-fest. No one wins in that situation. You could fear leaving the table because of what they'd say about you. There's no upside to the situation, so your best strategy might be to stay home and work on chores. At least you'll have the satisfaction of feeling that you've accomplished something.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Today would be best spent alone behind closed doors, if possible. There's a lot of tension in your household for some reason, Cancer. Since there isn't much you can do about it, try to avoid it altogether. Let your family members fight it out among themselves. You have better ways to spend your time. Why not take in a movie? When you go by yourself, you don't have to share the popcorn!

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Don't take anything you hear today at face value, Capricorn, especially where money is concerned. A well-meaning friend could approach you with an opportunity not to be missed. Listen to the pitch and take down all the information, but don't make any kind of commitment. You'll likely see several flaws when you review the information later. Point them out to your friend.

Leo (July 23-August 22)

There is a lot of tension in the air today, Leo. It isn't just affecting your home environment - everyone you meet seems out of sorts. You'll be happiest if you spend much of today in solitude. Books don't honk their horn at you and DVDs don't curse your driving ability. Who needs the aggravation that a day like today can bring? Enjoy a day away from other people's bad moods.

Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

This would be a good day to stay home and spend much of the day in bed, Aquarius! You've been working especially hard lately, juggling both home and work with your usual aplomb. But today you could feel a bit worn out and overwhelmed by everything that remains to be done. Give yourself a day of rest. Spend the day with a good book or some movies. You'll find this solitary time refreshing.

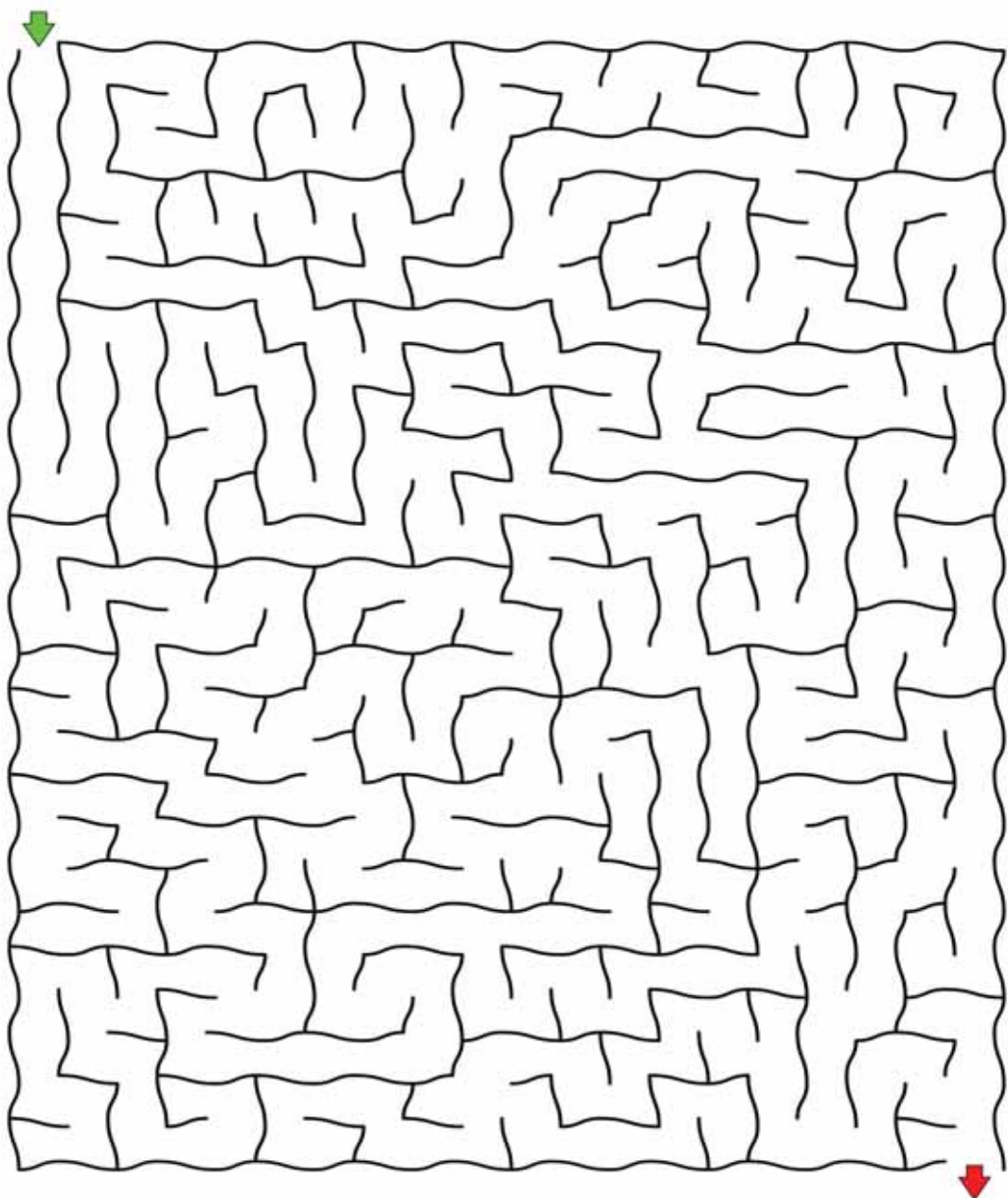
Virgo (August 23-September 22)

You feel that life would run more smoothly if money didn't exist! The amount of time and energy you spend sorting out your financial affairs is frustrating. Unfortunately, Virgo, today will be a frustrating day. Today you need to sit down and sort out some neglected bills. It isn't fun, but at least by the end of the day you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you got it done.

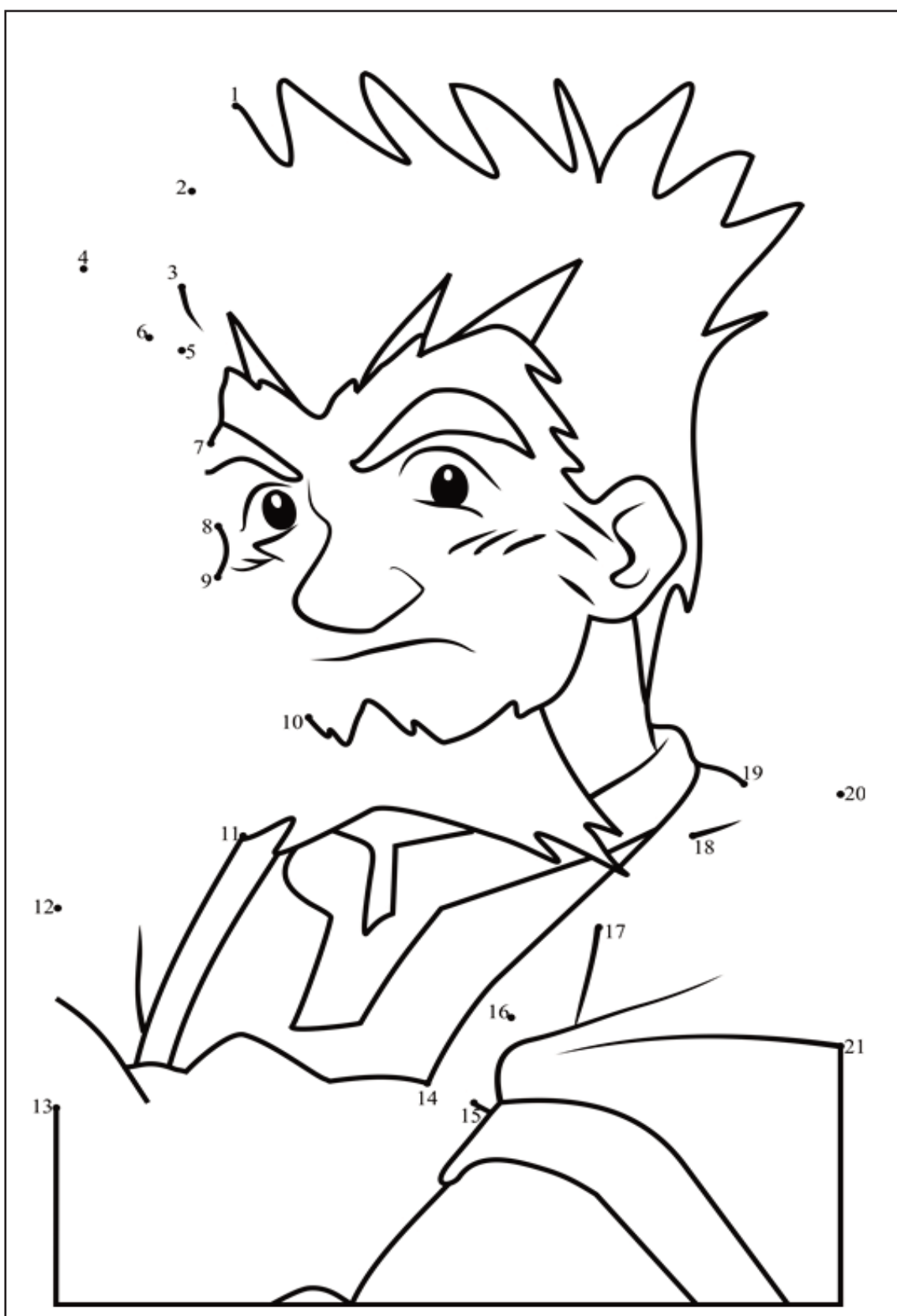
Pisces (February 19-March 20)

Love is very much in the air today, Pisces, so take advantage of this auspicious environment! Invite your loved one over to play hide and seek under the bedcovers! Or, if you don't have a playmate in your life at the moment, find other ways to fulfill the passion you feel. Spend the afternoon reading a good novel or invite a friend to watch a movie with you. Have a good time!

Find the way



Join the dots



Crossword

Johnny Appleseed Crossword

Across

- Direction American pioneers headed.
- Put into the ground to grow.
- Along with being a gardener, Johnny Appleseed was also a ____.
- Care and preservation of nature.
- State where Johnny Appleseed was born.
- Johnny Appleseed's real last name.
- Johnny Appleseed is an ____ legend.
- Johnny Appleseed supposedly threw these on the ground wherever he went.
- Mr. Appleseed's first name.
- A popular story regarded as historical but not necessarily true.
- No shoes on his feet.

Down

- A person who moves into a new area.
- A person who grows plants to sell them.
- Johnny Appleseed cared deeply about all ____.
- The "Buckeye State", where Johnny planted many nurseries.
- Fruit such as a Granny Smith or a Red Delicious.
- Place to pick apples.
- Johnny Appleseed's hat.
- In what month do we celebrate Johnny Appleseed Day?
- A courageous person.
- An early settler or explorer of an area.
- Beverage made from apples.

Word Bank

American	John	Plant
Animals	Legend	Pot
Apple	Massachusetts	Seeds
Barefoot	Missionary	September
Chapman	Nurseryman	Settler
Cider	Ohio	Westward
Conservation	Orchard	
Hero	Pioneer	

Sports

Photo of the day



ALMATY: Red Bull Skydive Team performs in Almaty, Kazakhstan. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Tokyo 2020 organising committee member contracts coronavirus

TOKYO: The Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics Organising Committee said yesterday a member of the organisation has tested positive for the new coronavirus.

A man in his 30s who works at the committee's headquarters had tested positive on Tuesday and had been placed in quarantine at his home, it added.

"The organising committee has identified those who have had close contact with the patient and entered them in home isolation from today, while the floor where the individual worked will be closed off and disinfected," the committee said in a statement.

The vast majority of Tokyo 2020's approximately 3,800 staff have been working from home since the Japanese government announced a state of emergency earlier this month.

Members of the organising committee are working on plans for the rescheduled Olympics following the decision to postpone the Games last month because of the coronavirus outbreak.

The Games, originally due to start in July, have been pushed back until 2021.

Over 2.5 million have been infected globally and 172,927 people have died of the coronavirus.

At least 12,000 people have tested positive for the virus in Japan, leading to 276 deaths as of Tuesday. —Reuters

NFL braces for 'Virtual Draft' amid coronavirus lockdown

'It's really the ultimate work from home experience'

LOS ANGELES: The NFL Draft will head into uncharted territory today, with lockdown restrictions put in place to combat the coronavirus pandemic forcing teams to take part in an unprecedented "virtual draft". The annual three-day marketplace to choose the cream of collegiate talent was initially due to have been held on the Las Vegas strip, with a special stage constructed amid the famous fountains of the Bellagio hotel.

But with Sin City's neon lights dimmed and casinos shuttered due to COVID-19, the gaudy backdrop envisioned by the NFL for one of its biggest events of the year has long since fallen by the wayside.

Instead, the NFL's 30 teams will choose the 255 draft selections from remote locations scattered across the United States. With different states having different lockdown regulations, the NFL has ruled that all league and team employees participating in the draft must do so from offices set up at home using an encrypted draft channel designed by Microsoft.

Teams of NFL technical support staff have spent weeks ensuring each participant has reliable internet connections at home while each team will have an IT specialist on standby at the home of its key decision maker.

Fifty-eight of the top draft prospects meanwhile will have in-home cameras as they wait to watch NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell announce the coveted first round picks from the basement of his home in New York.

'EXCITING, NERVE-WRACKING'

"It's really the ultimate work from home experience on a really large scale where everyone's watching."

Michelle McKenna, the NFL's chief information officer, told the Wall Street Journal. "It's exciting and very nerve-racking as well."

A trial run of the system on Monday was not without its glitches. According to ESPN, the Cincinnati Bengals — who are expected to take highly rated quarterback Joe Burrow at the top of the draft — encountered a technical problem as they attempted to use their first pick. It caused a delay of several minutes.

Other ESPN journalists reported negative feedback from team personnel. "Everybody is saying the same thing which is bandwidth is a problem. There are many communication issues," ESPN's Dianna Russini tweeted.

Other NFL team executives however said the test run had passed largely trouble-free after the early hiccup. "The draft went smooth," said Denver Broncos chief John Elway. "It got off to a little bit of a hiccup when we first started, but other than that it went really smooth."

"There were really no problems with it, so we got more comfortable with it. It should be fine to go on without a glitch. I'm sure there will be a couple of glitches here and there, but actually for the first time I thought it went pretty well."

LOSING 'PERSONAL' TOUCH

The biggest impact of COVID-19 on the draft may turn out to be the restrictions that have limited opportunities for face-to-face meetings between players and team officials. Normally prospective draft picks are flown to team facilities for interviews and private workouts conducted in front of team personnel.

the Stanley Cup without a champion, the only other time that's occurred was in 2005 with the season lost due to a labour dispute. The NHL will be hoping the suspended 2020 campaign does eventually resume to crown a champion.

A LEGEND EMERGES

Spanish flu and the war had a hand in Babe Ruth's emergence as a legendary baseball slugger. The disease had been carried to the US by troops returning from the war in Europe. Despite those twin evils a shortened version of the MLB season and World Series went ahead. In March, Ruth, the Red Sox's best pitcher, was given an opportunity to prove his skill as a hitter, smashing five home runs in practice for troops at an army camp in Arkansas. He was to survive two flu attacks that year to help the Red Sox to the title. In the first he was rushed to hospital, triggering rumours that he was on his deathbed. Widely regarded as the greatest baseball player in history he won seven World Series. The staging of the 1918 series in Boston was blamed for contributing to the spread of a lethal second wave of the disease that took the life of renowned major league umpire Silk O'Loughlin.

CHELSEA WIN SILVERWARE

The English League was suspended during the war years but regional competitions soldiered on. In 1919, with the invisible invader continuing its assault, Chelsea even won a trophy. The club's website notes that 36,000 were at Highbury to watch the 3-0 win over Fulham, the game going ahead despite two players,

Tom Logan and Harry Ford, "being escorted by 'the Spanish Lady'". Both recovered, unlike former outside right Angus Douglas, the Scottish international, who died aged 29. Other players to lose their lives were former Newcastle and Nottingham Forest forward Jack Stanley Allan (after returning from the war) and former Gainsborough Trinity winger Johnnie Pattinson. A quarter of a million Britons perished. The Football League resumed in September with the flu still not totally defeated.

BARCELONA DEFY SUSPENSION

Then, like now, the Spanish Football Federation in line with all the other major leagues suspended play. But sports daily Marca relates how Barcelona president Joan Gamper defied the lockdown with the Catalan Championship starting in October, 1918. Gamper headed a commission contesting the local health board's ruling that "football games will be suspended; theatres, cinemas and other venues will close, and large scale public hygiene measures will be implemented."

OLYMPICS ESCAPE

Coronavirus put paid to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Games eventually being postponed until 2021, although this week a Japanese virus expert declared he was "pessimistic" they could even be held then. There was no such drama over the 1920 Antwerp Olympics, which with Spanish flu defeated went ahead without a hitch. —AFP



LOS ANGELES: The Bengals had no issues with making their first-round selection last year, as they took Alabama tackle Jonah Williams. This year, the draft is entirely virtual.

Often those meetings are vital in shaping a team's view of a prospect, providing clues to intangible, unknown aspects of a player's personality and a clearer idea of how they may fit into a particular locker room culture.

Instead, teams have been conducting interviews and meetings with prospects via video call platforms such as Facetime and Zoom. "It's not great, it's not perfect, it's okay," said New York Giants general

manager Dave Gettleman.

"By not having pro guys, you miss that personal contact. Watching guys among their peers and how they operate, how they're received. That tells a lot when you just watch a kid in those circumstances. We're losing the personal touchpoints. We have the visual touchpoint, but we're really missing out on the personal touchpoint, when you can smell or feel a guy." —AFP

Sport in the time of Spanish flu

PARIS: The world's desperate combat against coronavirus evokes the battle it faced over a century ago with Spanish flu. AFP Sport examines here some cases of how sport fared during the 1918 pandemic:

SPANISH - IN NAME ONLY

It claimed an estimated 50 million victims, infecting around 500 million to earn the dubious honour of the deadliest pandemic in history. The virus marched across the globe but misleadingly became known as the Spanish flu. With World War One censorship in place newspapers were free to report on its effects in neutral Spain, generating the false impression the country was at the epicentre of the health crisis.

STANLEY CUP

The 1919 National Hockey League play-off series between Seattle Metropolitans and Montreal Canadiens was reaching its conclusion only to be called off abruptly before the decisive sixth game when some of the Canadiens players fell ill. One, Joe Hall who had collapsed on the ice in the fifth game, died whilst manager George Kennedy succumbed to influenza-related complications in 1921. It left

Gronk ends retirement, joins Bucs

TAMPA BAY: Former New England Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski came out of retirement and was traded to Tampa Bay Buccaneers to reunite with quarterback Tom Brady, both teams announced Tuesday.

The Buccaneers sent a fourth-round pick (No. 139 overall) to the Patriots, who sent back a seventh-round pick (No. 241) with Gronkowski. ESPN reported that Gronkowski passed his physical with an independent physician in Boston to complete the deal.

Gronkowski texted Fox Sports' Jay Glazer. "I'm back. I always said when I have that feeling and it feels right, I will be ready to take the field again. And I have that feeling. I'm ready."

NFL Network reported that Gronkowski, who turns 31 in May, has been putting on weight for a return to football after spending the 2019 season retired.

Tampa Bay made a run at acquiring Gronkowski — perhaps at Brady's urging — and landed the



Rob Gronkowski

player who ranks third all-time in touchdown receptions (79) by a tight end, trailing leader Antonio Gates (116) and Pro Football Hall of Famer Tony Gonzalez (111).

"Rob Gronkowski is one of the best tight ends in NFL history and he plays the game with the type of passion and desire that sets him apart," Buccaneers general manager Jason Licht said in a statement. "Rob has played his entire career alongside Tom Brady and their accomplishments speak for themselves. Together they have developed the type of chemistry on and off the field that is crucial to success."

"Rob combines elite-level skills as both a receiver and blocker but what really makes him special is the fact that he's a proven winner who brings that championship mindset and work ethic." —Reuters

Sports

West Ham, Crystal Palace postpone Australia tour due to pandemic

Spurs' Aurier, Sissoko apologise for social distancing breach

LONDON: West Ham United and Crystal Palace have indefinitely postponed their July tour to Queensland, Australia because of the novel coronavirus outbreak, both Premier League clubs announced yesterday.

West Ham United and Palace were scheduled to meet A-League side Brisbane Roar, coached by former England striker Robbie Fowler in the inaugural Queensland Champions Cup. The exhibition event was set to take place in three cities — Townsville, Gold Coast and Brisbane — along the Queensland coast from July 11 to 18 with each team playing two matches.

“It is bitterly disappointing not to be able to make the club's landmark trip to Queensland this July,” Palace chairman Steve Parish said in a statement <https://www.cpfc.co.uk/news/2020/april/tour-to-queensland-postponed> on the club's website.

“We'll do everything we possibly can to try to rearrange the tour for 2021, once things become clear with the Premier League schedule for the remainder of this season, and next year's provisional timings, too.”

Soccer in England was suspended indefinitely last month due to the flu-like virus, which has infected 2.5 million people globally causing over 172,900 deaths. West Ham manager David Moyes said the clubs had

made the right decision to postpone the tour.

“This is a situation that has affected the entire world, though, and the only thing that matters at this time is that people stay safe and well,” Moyes said in a statement <https://www.whufc.com/news/articles/2020/april/22-april/eva-air-queensland-champions-cup-postponed> on West Ham's website.

“We hope the tournament can be rearranged at a later date once things are back to normal and we look forward to visiting Australia in the future.”

Earlier, Tottenham Hotspur defender Serge Aurier and midfielder Moussa Sissoko have apologised for breaching government guidelines on social distancing during the novel coronavirus outbreak after posting a video of themselves training together.

Ivorian Aurier shared a series of videos on social media of himself and Frenchman Sissoko doing shuttle runs together but later deleted them. “We wish to apologise for not setting the right example here,” the pair said in a joint statement released to the British media.

“We recognise that as professional footballers we have a responsibility to be role models, particularly during this uncertain period that everyone around the world is facing.

“We must all respect the government advice to

minimise the number of lives lost during this pandemic. We cannot thank NHS staff enough for their tireless work...and we shall both be making a financial donation to show our support.”



LEICESTER: File photo shows West Ham United manager David Moyes and Marko Arnautovic celebrate after the victory over Leicester City.

“The Premier League was suspended last month because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government has asked the public to stay at home to help slow the spread of the virus. Reported cases of the

virus have crossed 2.5 million globally and more than 172,900 people have died.

Spurs boss Jose Mourinho was photographed at an outdoor training session at Hadley Common with midfielder Tanguy Ndombele earlier this month. Defenders Davinson Sanchez and Ryan Sessegnon were also filmed by passers-by running together through the park. — Reuters

Swiss showjumper takes stock after Olympic delay

LONDON: Martin Fuchs was dreaming of celebrating Olympic showjumping gold on his grey gelding Clooney 51, soaking up the atmosphere in the Japanese heat as the Swiss flag was raised.

Instead, the 27-year-old rider, who competed in Rio four years ago, has been forced to play a waiting game by the global coronavirus pandemic. The European champion and world silver medalist began the year as world number one ahead of compatriot Steve Guerdat and was gunning for Olympic gold in Tokyo.

But Fuchs is confident that his horse will be up to the challenge at the postponed Games next year, and is enjoying aspects of the enforced break from his usual relentless schedule. “It is obviously a disappointment as I was very excited and looking forward to the Olympics this year,” he told AFP by phone from his stables in Wangi, Switzerland.

“But I think even next year Clooney will still be in a good shape as he won't be doing much this year because there is not much happening,” Fuchs hails from a family whose showjumping pedigree spans generations.

His grandfather was a showjumper and his father, Thomas, and uncle both represented Switzerland at the Olympics. His uncle, Markus Fuchs, won silver in the team event at the 2000 Sydney Games.

Fuchs said the postponement of events had meant a big upheaval but not to his routine at home, where he rides “four or five of his eight good horses daily”.

“We have our staff and grooms working,” he said. “My Dad mostly is still riding a lot or training and putting up fences. Not going to shows is not such a big difference to daily life.

“No shows, no dealing or trading going on but still same work going on, just there is no income



ROTTERDAM: File photo taken on August 25, 2019 shows Switzerland's Martin Fuchs celebrates after winning the individual final day at the European Jumping Championships in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. — AFP

anymore.” As a result Fuchs, whose hunger for competition began aged seven competing on a pony called Cleopatra, says they have had to dig into their reserves.

“Definitely for us now it is a bit rougher as no prize money or trading,” he said. “But we managed over the past years to put money aside so we can touch that now to pay for things.”

‘A STEP BACK’

Fuchs, who finished sixth in the team event and joint-ninth in the individual competition in Rio in 2016, says spending time at home has been a rare joy.

Showjumping is at times a remorseless sport and at one point last year he spent 17 successive weeks on the road. “Times like this it is good to be open-minded and see other things apart from the horses,” he said.

“It is good to take a step back and enjoy my time

going for walks, reading a book or doing a puzzle. It is an interesting time to think about other stuff. “It is completely different to what one is normally used to.”

Despite the positive side of the enforced break, Fuchs hopes to return to some form of normality later in the year with the Rolex Grand Slam of Showjumping in his sights after victory in Geneva.

To succeed he has to win the Spruce Meadows “Masters” in Canada in September and at Aachen in Germany, postponed from its original date to later in the year due to the COVID-19 crisis. Winning the Grand Slam — victory at three consecutive majors — brings a one-million-euro (\$1.1 million) bonus on top of prize money.

But Fuchs' task is tough — just one rider, Britain's Scott Brash in 2015, has achieved the feat before. “It would mean a lot to win the Rolex Grand Slam by winning three of the majors,” he said. “They are the most prestigious events in our sport.” — AFP

Jim Laker remains one of England's finest spin bowlers

LONDON: Jim Laker, who died on April 23, 1986, remains one of England's finest spin bowlers and is best remembered for his record 19 wickets in a single test match in 1956. Not only was that performance against Australia, at Old Trafford, a Test record, it has never been matched even in first class cricket, with only two players coming within two wickets since.

Yet while the memory of the ‘Laker Test’ remains strong, his impact on the game was much broader — he was a key part of the Surrey team which won seven county championships in a row between 1952 and 1958 and claimed 193 wickets in 46 tests over an 11-year period.

Born in Yorkshire, Laker viewed himself as a batsman and quick bowler but was persuaded to try his hand at off-spin. He realised his potential during war-time inter-service games on matting wickets in Egypt.

Emerging in county cricket with Surrey after World War Two, Laker, tall and with a high, elegant bowling action, showed that his effectiveness was by no means limited to such surfaces.

Having settled in the south of England after the war, he was signed by Surrey and by 1948 he earned his first test appearance, in Barbados. His emergence led to inevitable overtures from his home county but despite Yorkshire's best efforts, he stuck with Surrey.

His greatest achievement was back in the North,

however, during a rainy and blustery test at Old Trafford, eight years after his England debut. England batted first and made 459 all out with Peter Richardson scoring his maiden test century and David Sheppard also making a hundred and there was little indication of what was to come.

With his Surrey team mate, left-arm orthodox spinner Tony Lock, operating at the other end, Laker ran through the Australians taking 9-37 as the tourists were bowled out for 84. His seven wickets after tea were at a rate of one every three balls.

There was anger among the visitors about the surface, with former Australia spinner Bill O'Reilly writing in the press that “This pitch is a disgrace. What lies in store for Test cricket if groundsmen are allowed to play the fool like this?”

Following on, Australia battled through the rain delays into the fifth day, with opener Colin McDonald's 337-minute 89, in such tricky batting conditions, a brave and skilled innings. Yet Laker was too much for them again and he ended with all 10 wickets. Australia captain Ian Johnson put aside concerns about the wicket and was generous in his praise. “When the controversies and side issues of this match are forgotten, Laker's wonderful bowling will remain,” he said.

He was right but Laker still had plenty more to offer the game. He caused controversy with his autobiography in 1960, which attacked the last remnants of the amateur-professional divide in the game and led to him losing his pass to Surrey's Oval ground and honorary MCC membership — although both were later restored.

Laker went on to be a respected television commentator for the BBC, for whom he had become the first cricketer to win the Sports Personality of the Year award after his exploits in Manchester. — Reuters

Whitlock eyes return to action in New Zealand

WELLINGTON: All Blacks veteran Sam Whitlock hopes to return to rugby in New Zealand at some stage this year after the COVID-19 pandemic put paid to his stint in Japan's Top League.

The 115-test lock had planned to skip the Super Rugby season while completing a short-term contract with Robbie Deans's Panasonic Wild Knights but has returned home after Japan's domestic competition was cancelled last month.

Super Rugby, along with all competitions in New Zealand, has been suspended as part of measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus, but if action resumes Whitlock hopes to play for Scott Robertson's Crusaders or the Canterbury provincial side. “We are pretty gutted the Japan competition has been cancelled, we understand, but we were sitting pretty well on the table,” the 31-year-old told New Zealand broadcaster Sky Sports.

“But we are back in New Zealand at the moment and we will make our way back to Christchurch once we are allowed to travel a bit further. “We will head back there and hopefully meet back up with the Crusaders or Canterbury, whatever competition kicks off first.” As a board member of New Zealand's players union, Whitlock has been heavily involved in scenario planning with governing body New Zealand Rugby and local teams as to how a restart of the season might unfold.

The All Blacks international season is scheduled to start in July with two tests against Wales and one against Scotland but the matches are in doubt due to travel restrictions and border controls to contain the new coronavirus. Players would also need a three to four week lead-in before any restart to get match-fit, Whitlock said. “There are a number of calendars out there that we are debating. As players, we just have to be ready to go when we do get the information from the government saying we can get into it at this level,” he added. — Reuters

County cricketers play waiting game during lockdown

LONDON: County cricketer Tom Alsop is kicking his heels because of the coronavirus pandemic but says his mother's job on the front line in a British hospital puts his frustrations into perspective.

Global cricket is on hold, including the start of the English season and the lucrative Twenty20 Indian Premier League, with dire warnings sounded over the potential financial fallout from a prolonged shutdown.

Alsop has been placed on the furlough scheme — which sees 80 percent of wages up to a certain level covered by the British government. The players are in talks with the club about the remaining 20 percent.

The 24-year-old, who says county cricketers' wages are “very good for what we do”, said the issue pales into insignificance compared with the work his mother and other National Health Service staff are doing.

“My morale is as positive as it can be during these uncertain times. With my mother's job in intensive care (working as a senior critical care nurse) at RUH (Royal United Hospitals) Bath, it really puts things in perspective,” the wicketkeeper-batsman told AFP.

Alsop, who has represented England at Under-19 and Lions (England's second-tier) level, says he is fortunate as a professional sportsman. “At the end of the day it's a game. I don't drive into work every day wondering how many lives I might need to save or are there going to be enough beds for everyone,” he said.

He hopes one positive outcome of the coronavirus will be that it will make people rethink their priorities. “What really matters in life is family and loved ones,” he said. “Not being upset over not having the newest Mercedes or that your stock portfolio has fallen by a few points.”

Alsop's father was responsible, along with his older brother Owen, for sparking his interest in cricket, with fiercely fought games in their back garden. “That often ended in argument, mostly down to me only wanting to bat and not bowl,” he said. He has gone on to enjoy “exhilarating highs” including his maiden first-class century and seeing different cultures on tour, including Sri Lanka.

TRAINING IN ISOLATION

Alsop said county players, being on 12-month contracts, were required to continue training and take part in strength and conditioning during the off-season, making it a “full-time job”.

The relative monotony of that has been alleviated with two spells playing in Durban, South Africa, and one training in Perth, Australia. County cricketers in England and Wales are now being forced to work out alone as they wait to see if and when the season starts due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

“Training is difficult at the moment in respects to batting and ‘keeping,” said Alsop, who is currently living with his parents. “At Hampshire we've all been given home fitness programmes so I've been following mine so far,” he said. “The club's WhatsApp has been very busy, everyone is staying in touch. “There's been lots of quizzes, pictures and videos shared, all aimed at making each other laugh and to keep each other sane.” He and his team-mates would love to be playing the sport they are paid for but like everyone else they are in the dark over when or whether the season might start. — AFP

18 NFL braces for 'Virtual Draft' amid coronavirus lockdown



18 Gronk ends retirement, joins Buccaneers



19 Swiss showjumper takes stock after Olympic delay



German football plans May return



MUNICH: File photo shows Bayern Munich's players attend a training session at the football team's training grounds in Munich, southern Germany, on April 16, 2020.—AFP

BERLIN: German football authorities are set to announce plans today for Bundesliga matches to restart on May 9 in empty stadiums, but the potential return in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic is meeting some opposition.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's government is slowly easing nationwide restrictions and the resumption of the Bundesliga, which was halted on March 13, would boost morale in football-mad Germany. It would also make the Bundesliga the first top-flight European league to begin playing again.

Large public events are banned in Germany until August 31, yet football could resume without spectators — known as "ghost games" in German. Germany has more testing capacity than other European countries and players could be tested regularly.

The 18 clubs have been back in training for three weeks, albeit in small groups with social distancing observed even on the pitch. Having already been given signs of encouragement by politicians, the German Football League (DFL) is set to iron out details in Thursday's video conference meeting of the clubs.

Final approval could be given by Merkel and regional state premiers at a meeting on April 30. The DFL is desperate for the league season to be com-

pleted by June 30 to ensure payment of the next instalment of television money, worth around 300 million euros (\$326 million).

The cash could keep some clubs alive, with 13 of the 36 clubs in Germany's top two tiers reportedly on the verge of insolvency. With fans across Europe and the world deprived of football, the games are also likely to attract TV audiences far beyond Germany.

With fans locked out and asked to stay at home, only players, backroom staff, stewards, media and officials will be allowed into the stadiums for games with numbers strictly regulated.

Some clubs are being innovative about the problem of potentially playing in near-empty stadiums. Borussia Mönchengladbach have filled their terraces with life-sized cardboard cut-outs of fans.

However, the restart is unpopular in some quarters and criticism has come from some supporters' groups. Critics point to figures of more than 140,000 cases of coronavirus and over 4,500 deaths in Ger-

many as proof that football is inappropriate.

Restarting the season in the middle of the pandemic "would be sheer mockery for the rest of society" according to supporters' group Fanszene Deutschlands, who accuse the clubs of greed. "Professional football has long been sick enough and should continue to be quarantined," it said. Nationwide fan group "Unsere Kurve" has also slammed the move. Football "cannot act in isolation from the situation in society as a whole," it said. "If the game continues like this, we're out!" Even some players are uncomfortable about returning to action in the current situation.

"There are more important things than football at the moment," said Bayern Munich defender Niklas Süle.

In Berlin, Union forward Sebastian Polter said "nobody wants ghost games — no player, no fan" even if they appear to be the only option to complete the season. It will also take around 20,000 tests of players and backroom staff to be able to complete all the remaining matches. Germany has a testing capacity of

550,000 per week, so 20,000 tests spread over the nine remaining Bundesliga matchdays seems manageable. However, the Robert Koch Institute, which advises the German government, sees things differently. "I think the tests should be used where it makes medical sense," the institute's vice-president Lars Schaade said on Tuesday. "I do not see why certain population groups, whether athletes or otherwise, should be routinely screened."

'LEAP OF FAITH'

Nevertheless, it seems highly likely the Bundesliga will return next month. Markus Soeder, the state premier of Bavaria, and Armin Laschet, head of North Rhine-Westphalia — two key German football strongholds — have voiced support.

Christian Seifert, the Bundesliga's CEO, has said the league's clubs and stars have a duty "to repay the trust" shown by the politicians. Senior figures at Bayern Munich, who have a four-point lead at the top of the league, Borussia Dortmund and RB Leipzig have expressed similar gratitude. "This is a great leap of faith," said Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke. "Football is an opportunity to give millions of fans a little more zest for life again." — AFP



Soccer to resume without spectators

McIlroy against fan-less Ryder Cup

LOS ANGELES: World number one Rory McIlroy on Tuesday added his voice to the chorus of players opposed to the idea of playing this year's Ryder Cup without spectators.

With the global golf season in chaos due to the coronavirus pandemic, the game's administrators are running through a range of possible scenarios as they attempt to plot a path back to competition.

For organizers of the Ryder Cup, which is due to

take place at Whistling Straits, Wisconsin from September 25-27, that has included studying whether the tournament could be played without fans.

PGA chief executive Seth Waugh revealed earlier this week that officials had looked at the possibility of creating a "virtual fan experience" for the fiercely competitive team clash between Europe and the United States.

Waugh however acknowledged that a Ryder Cup without spectators was "hard to imagine," noting they were an integral part of the raucous and often febrile golfing spectacle.

McIlroy, speaking during an Instagram live event for sponsors TaylorMade, said he would rather see this year's event delayed for a year than played before

empty galleries. "I have a pretty strong view on this. I get the financial implications for everyone involved — there's a lot that goes into putting on the Ryder Cup that people don't probably know or appreciate — but having a Ryder Cup without fans is not a Ryder Cup," McIlroy said.

"For me I would much rather they delay it until 2021 than play it at Whistling Straits without fans. And that's from a European going to America, knowing that I'm going to get abuse!"

"Obviously it would be better for Europeans to play without fans because we wouldn't have to deal with some of the stuff that you have to put up with — but at the same time it's not a Ryder Cup."

"It wouldn't be a great spectacle, there'd be no at-

mosphere, so if it came to whether they had to choose between not playing the Ryder Cup or playing it without fans, I would say just delay it for a year and play it in 2021."

McIlroy added that a year's delay would also work in favor of 2022 Ryder Cup hosts Italy, one of the worst affected countries in the coronavirus outbreak.

"If they do delay it until 2021, the next Ryder Cup is supposed to be in Italy, and we know how badly affected Italy was by coronavirus, so it gives that country an extra year to prepare for the Ryder Cup in 2023 instead of 2022," McIlroy said.

"This is only one opinion but if we have to play the Ryder Cup behind closed doors this year, I'd rather just delay it." — AFP