

Friday Times

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Ramadan

KAREEM

Imsak	03:38
Fajr	03:48
Dhuhr	11:46
Asr	15:21
Maghrib	18:20
Isha	19:42

Kuwait Times
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RAMADAN KAREEM
عساكم من عواده



**Social distancing, lockdown
upend Ramadan traditions**

See Page 5

Local

Ramadan and food distribution

Pandemic Diaries

By Jamie Etheridge

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The number of people in Kuwait without salaries or income is now estimated at more than 250,000. Although a few thousand have left or will be leaving to return to their home countries, the vast majority will remain here during the holy month of Ramadan.

How will they eat?

There are many charities now working to feed the poor and indigent, but the usual modes of food distribution - through iftars held at mosques, for instance - will not be possible under the current circumstances. As we've already seen, every time food distribution trucks enter the isolation areas, crowds gather, creating the exact conditions for spreading the virus that the government is working so hard to prevent. So even when the food is ready for distribution, how can they get it to the people who need it safely? How can charities and even individual volunteers help?

The challenge is enormous, the numbers daunting

This pandemic is proving to us all that we can come up with creative and innovative ways of solving problems. From homemade masks to USB-sized testing kits, from multi-user ventilators to co-op shopping appointment apps, we are quick to solve problems in a crisis because we have no choice.

Where there is a will - there will be an app providing the solution. Or if not an app, at least a new way of thinking. The gatherings for iftar will not be possible this Ramadan. But the spirit of iftar, of giving and caring for those less fortunate remains.

So here are some ideas that might help the distribution logistics:

Allow distribution trucks to travel and distribute per building. This has already been done for the buildings under quarantine, and then one person from each household (where there are families) can come down to receive the food, or if it's a bachelors' building, then one floor at a time. This may take longer and not be possible for every building every day, but if focused on the isolation areas where people cannot go out and work, then the distribution may be concentrated enough to work without further spreading the virus.

Another option is to set up distribution the same way that we now take appointments for co-ops. People must apply for a time slot and then go only during the time slot. This would limit those outdoors and will also help with crowd control. The government and charities are already looking at this problem, trying to find means to distribute food, and especially iftars, in a safe, responsible way.

Ramadan: The month of sharing

IN MY VIEW

By Abdellatif Sharaa

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I was at a cooperative society two days ago and was amazed at the amount of food including rice, cereals, meat, chicken and more a person had bought. At the cashier, I was right behind him, and he might have felt that I was somehow criticizing his purchases, so he said hello and started a conversation. He told me that the two carts will be enough for just a week, because he is committed to helping some families and individuals, adding that not a grain of rice or a piece of meat will go waste! I in turn commended him and wished him all the best, and prayed that Allah accepts his deeds.

Ramadan is with us now - it is the month of blessing and charity, and as we have prepared for it, we should remember that there are those who could not. We have to remember that there are families who may not be able to prepare as they wish, bearing in mind the unprecedented current situation due to the furious attack of COVID-19.

Ramadan is not only a month of refraining from eating and drinking - it also has other aspects, like remembering the

needy, whose social and psychological suffering increase during this month because of their inability to meet the needs of their families, while many others can afford to get what they wish in the form of food and drink.

Some people, although in need, will not declare this due to their self-pride. Poverty hurts when a man feels unable to bring home the minimum of what his family requires. Here in Kuwait, there are many charities and people there believe in empathizing with others and going out to help them. They seek homes whose owners are shy to ask for help, although it may be their right to ask.

Now as COVID-19 was mentioned above, we all know that Ramadan is characterized by people gathering just before iftar time to get a meal, which gives them a sense of community and togetherness at this time. This Ramadan will be like no other, and I wonder if this tradition of distributing food will continue and in what fashion. If trucks are sent with the meals, I hope that policemen or some people of authority are sent with them so that chaotic scenes, as we have seen in some areas, will not be repeated. We have seen people almost glued to each other while attempting to get meals, instead of being a meter or two apart to avoid being infected with the virus - as if they are saying welcome corona!

May Almighty Allah help us overcome this crisis and bring life back to normal, cure the sick and bestow His mercy upon all those who left us. May Allah bless you all.

Helpless in Jleeb

Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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These days are difficult for everyone in light of the repercussions of the spread of the coronavirus - and indeed there are economic, social, health and security impacts. But I believe that globally, people are not equal in confronting the situation, as the suffering of people varies between those who have financial resources and those who don't.

For example, some choose their favorite food from the best restaurants to reach their doorsteps, while others do not have the luxury of choice and may stay hungry or wait for charity. Some may live in big houses and some may not even have space for a single bed.

I believe material suffering is the most severe, because many people have lost their jobs or the companies they work for have gone bankrupt and therefore wages have stopped. There is no doubt that the suffering is enormous and devastating, especially for expatriates in dire financial situations.

I received a letter from an expat living in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh. This area has been under a total lockdown for more than two weeks now. The letter says: Respected madam. With due respect I want to inform you that for more than 15 days we are in home quarantine and haven't received any type of help. If we want to renew our residency, we have to pay KD 900-1,000 for two years. But in this situation, nobody asks how we spend our daily lives. Please consider us as human; we have a right to live and I hope you will publish this letter in Kuwait Times about our life in Kuwait right now."

Firstly, I really thank this expat reader for his email. I know there are many charities providing food to residents in this area, but making sure that they get enough food is important - maybe there are children who need milk, and so on. The more the better.

Another inquiry from the same person is about the money that must be paid in order to allow him to stay in Kuwait for two years. Right now, the country is at war against trafficking in persons and is hunting human traffickers and merchants, because what they are doing is against humanity and the country's laws.

I know this amount is usually paid to a merchant to stamp the residency for a person, but often this person does not work for this merchant and his relationship does not go beyond a name in the employment file. This is the situation which the state is now fighting, because this is human trafficking, financial corruption and abusing the rights of the worker, because the reality is that the merchant earns money and keeps the person stuck, not guaranteeing that he will find a job, especially in these times.

So I hope that you do not pay money to a human trafficker. I think that it is better for someone who finds himself in such a condition to leave for his country, and he can come back later in a legal and proper manner when things settle down.

Secondly, Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh has a large number of expatriates living in it, especially from the Asian community, and everyone knows that this area had many problems before the coronavirus outbreak occurred in terms of population, sanitation and the number of single men residing there. Over the years, the situation got worse, and lately the spread of the virus became severe and rapid. So security authorities isolated this area to ensure that the virus does not spread to other less densely-populated areas in order to examine the residents and find violators of residency laws.

Kuwait is working hard for expats of all nationalities, including those from countries that refuse to receive their own citizens and do not want them, which is something I regard as shameful, at a time when most countries insist on the return of their citizens.

Finally, I hope that this expatriate does not think that no one cares, because here in Kuwait we care for all. But this is a global pandemic that needs awareness and cooperation. For any kind of help, you can go to any security point and inform them of your need for food - I am sure that they will not hesitate to help.



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Souq Mubarakia 'alive' again

By Ben Garcia

Souq Mubarakia is thriving again with customers after it re-opened earlier this week. On March 17, the Municipality had decided to close the market to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. But shops selling non-food items are still closed and people are being asked to observe social distancing. The fruit and vegetable and the meat markets are now open, along with the area where dates are sold. Some baqalas and shops related to foodstuff and herbal products are also open in the market.

"I thank God for the opening of Souq Mubarakia. I hope we

will be able to go back to normal, especially since we will soon be marking Ramadan," a shopper buying fruit from a vendor inside the market told Kuwait Times. The meat shops were also busy. "I am working in a restaurant in Maidan Hawally. We are open every day, but strictly following guidelines on how we should be operating. Since the closure of Souq Mubarakia, we've been getting our supplies from supermarkets, but the problem there is the long queues. Opening of Mubarakia is a gift for us this Ramadan," an Indian buyer said while purchasing meat for his restaurant from his regular butcher in Mubarakia.





— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Social distancing, lockdown upend Ramadan traditions

By Shakir Reshamwala

Ramadan is a time of piety and prayers, fasting and feasting, and spending time with family and friends. But this year the holy month will be a surreal experience, with all mosques closed, most shops shuttered, a 16-hour curfew and people confined at home. For retailers, business owners and restaurants, this Ramadan will be a bleak one; people are holding on to their money, while others haven't been paid their salaries or only partially.

The coronavirus outbreak and the resulting lockdown have also disrupted many of Kuwait's unique Ramadan traditions that have been observed by generations of citizens and residents of this country as a source of comfort and belonging. These traditions all involve gathering in some form, especially during the night, but a ban on gatherings has put paid to these customs. Even the mainstay of Kuwait's social life - gathering in diwanias - has been banned.

The first victim of social distancing was graish - the traditional pre-Ramadan feast when family members and even neighbors

gather before the onset of the fasting month. In the olden days, the women of the house would empty the larders of their homes of foods that are not usually eaten in Ramadan, and extended families would gather to partake in the potluck. In recent years, the food was usually ordered from restaurants and the gatherings were smaller, but with society frowning on get-togethers these days, the practice was abandoned.

Another Ramadan tradition - Girgian - will likely not take place this year. Girgian is marked on the 13th, 14th and 15th of Ramadan, when children go 'trick or treating' to collect candies and nuts around the neighborhood. Lately, the simple confectionery of yore was replaced by gourmet chocolates and exotic nuts housed in brand-name bags and pouches that were often more expensive than their contents. But with children not even going to school nowadays and parents fearful of exposing them to any infection, kids going door to door seems to be a remote possibility.

Like Girgian, the ghabqa - a gathering of family and friends in the evenings of Ramadan - had become a lavish corporate af-

fair, where companies invited clients and employees along with their families for a night of fun and feasting, with the media in attendance too. With a nighttime curfew in place and the ban on gatherings, one can be sure ghabqas are out of fashion this year.

The firing of the iftar cannon - signaling to the faithful it is time to break the fast - takes place every day of Ramadan at the beautifully restored Naif Palace in Kuwait City and is broadcast live on Kuwait TV and radio. The firing of the cannon by uniformed guards in red livery used to attract dozens of families daily in the open yard of the palace, which is set up to resemble pre-oil Kuwait, complete with vintage cars, artisans and children in traditional garb. The firing may still take place this year, but one can be sure the yard will be eerily empty.

Though not a social tradition, congregation tahajjud prayers during the last 10 nights of Ramadan are observed in most mosques across the state. The popularity of qiyam al-layl prayers had skyrocketed in the past two decades, especially at the Grand Mosque. Thousands every year attend the nightly prayers, with well over 100,000 worshippers

converging on Kuwait's largest mosque on the night of the 27th of Ramadan. But mosques have been shut in Kuwait for more than a month, with even the five obligatory prayers not taking place in congregation, so holding mass supererogatory prayers - like taraweeh and tahajjud - is out of the question, along with Eid prayers.

Of course, all of the abovementioned traditions and rituals are not essential to observe the Ramadan fast. One can remain at home and fast, eat simply, and pray with the family or individually. Iftar will not be served in tents outside mosques this year, so seeking out and helping poor people dependent on food handouts in the neighborhood is a must.

Perhaps the coronavirus pandemic can be a blessing in disguise, stripping away the rampant commercialization of Ramadan witnessed in recent years and returning the holy month to what it actually is - an act of worship, empathizing with the less-fortunate and exercising self-discipline.

Local

Virtual tête-à-tête with Giselle Khoury

With the current shift to online and social media communications due to the spread of COVID-19 and the current curfew, LOYAC's Academy for Performance Arts (LAPA) recently launched a live interactive talk show presented by LOYAC chairperson Fareeh Al-Saqqaf on Instagram. Saqqaf interactively interviewed the iconic Lebanese media figure Giselle Khoury in the first episode, in which the audience took part by asking questions.

Responding to the first question on how Khoury spends her time during the curfew, she said she spends her day reading, and that she is currently reading a novel titled 'Ten Minutes & Thirty Eight Seconds', which describes the last moments in a dying person's life during which he remains aware of what is going on around him. She added that she herself had been through a similar experience, when she was hit by a car and felt she came back from the dead.

Khoury added that she was also preparing new episodes of her program including two about Hezbollah and the 'July War', adding that the Lebanese civil war was the reason behind starting her career despite her family's opposition and plans to have her become an architect. Khoury added she has a reputation of interviewing celebrity leaders, presidents and intellectual figures - she has interviewed presidents Ali Abdullah Saleh, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Hosni Mubarak, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, Yasser Arafat, Mahmoud



Giselle Khoury



Samir Kassir



Hamzah Al-Alyan



Jewish family in Kuwait before World War I.

Abbas, Iraq's caretaker president Ghazi Al-Yawar, Jalal Talabani and Jacques Chirac.

"Former Algerian President Bouteflika considered me a good omen as he won the presidency elections while I was interviewing him," she said, adding that President Mubarak had a good sense of humor and was kind and spontaneous. She added that she rejected two invitations from Muammar Gaddafi to interview him. In addition, Khoury said she had also interviewed poets Mahmoud Darweesh and Adonis, in addition to Edward Saed, who described Jerusalem as a 'Sad City'. "I also benefited a lot from interviewing the late journalist Mohammed Hasanain Heikal and learned that work is a shrine," she added.

Responding to a question about the Samir Kassir Foundation, named after her late husband

who was assassinated in Beirut 15 years ago, Khoury said that it was founded in 2005 and that it advocates the freedom of the media through its 'SKIES' center founded in 2007. She added that she intends to publish her autobiography and the story of her love for Samir, whom she married only two years before his assassination. "I will never forgive those involved and have his blood on their hands. I will go after and bring them to justice. My autobiography will include secrets unknown even to my kids," she concluded.

Saqqaf announced launching 'Al-Jawhar' (The Essence) program in collaboration with Khoury to provide training for young media figures. Meanwhile, she said that 'Al-Sada' program is an untraditional talk show held online with outstanding guests. Saqqaf added that the program also

includes a weekly segment titled 'Al-Sada Memory' presented by journalist Hamzah Al-Alyan, the founder of Al-Qabas archive, about Kuwait and Arab history.

"In his segment, Alyan talks about Jews in Kuwait, noting that they came from Iran, Iraq and India and mainly inhabited the Sharq area in the Jewish neighborhood," Saqqaf added, noting that the total number of Jews in Kuwait was 50 in 1890, and they included families like Khawajah, Mehleb, Sassoon, Shamon, Kohail and others such as artists Saleh and Dawood Al-Kuwaiti, who originally came from Iraq.

Ramadan at home: A novel experience

By Hassan Twaha Bwambale

Due to the current situation in Kuwait, and all over the world, it is most likely that we will witness a different kind of Ramadan. It will be a novel situation with a never-before seen or felt ambience. Therefore, let's use our time wisely. Before I share my suggestions on what we can do as we observe fasting at home, I will first share two narrations of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) that address many issues, including our current situation.

Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said what is translated as, "There will be afflictions and trials (in the near future) during which a sitting person will be better than a standing one, the standing one will be better than a walking one, and the walking one will be better than a running one. And whoever exposes himself to these afflictions and trials, they will destroy him. So whoever finds a refuge from them, let him take it" (Al-Bukhari #7,081 and Muslim #2,886)

In the above Hadeeth, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) used the word 'fitnah', which has a lot of connotations, among them punishment, trials and tests, calamities and tribulations, a time when people will fight each other for fleeting mundane enjoyments, a time when materialism will supersede morality and humanity, or a time of plagues that, as part of precautionary measures, necessitate staying at home.

The second relevant prophetic narration, related by Uqbah bin Amir (RA) can be translated as: "I said, 'O Messenger of Allah, what are the means to salvation (i.e. safety)?'. He replied, 'Control your tongue, stay in your house, and cry over your sins.'" (Al-Albani narrated it as saheeh (authentic) in Saheeh At-Tirmidhi # 2, 406) In this hadith, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advises us to do three things, which are pertinent to our situation today. They are:

a. Control your tongue. During this critical time, do not spread rumors to create panic among people. Verify any information you get before sharing it. Do not curse or insult anyone or point fingers at people who might be innocent, claiming they are the source of your suffering. In short, use your tongue in positive and constructive ways that please Allah (SWT).

b. Stay in your house and be satisfied with what Allah (SWT) has given you of a spouse, children, property, etc. Mend or improve your relationship with your family members, and spend quality time with them positively and creatively.

c. Cry over your sins. No one is guaranteed to survive the pandemic, making the present moment an appropriate time to repent to your Creator before it's too late. Regret, apologies, atoning for wrongdoings and resolving to quit sinning are part of the repentance process. So now is a good time to repent, making sure you cry and implore the Most Merciful to forgive you.

What else should we do during this critical yet testing time?

a. Perform the five daily compulsory prayers and taraweeh in a congregation at home with your family members, and share your experiences of observing the fast during

a partial curfew and in some places, a full curfew. Try your best to impart some knowledge about Allah (SWT), Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), his devout companions, and our rightly-guided ancestors.

b. Spend quality time with your family members and instill in them the Islamic values, such as personal hygiene. Equip them with knowledge and the wisdom that are essential for their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being.

c. Read and learn as much as you can, taking advantage of quiet time to hone your skills and knowledge. Learn more about your religion, improve your skills and share useful knowledge. Also, allocate some time to read and recite the Noble Quran, making sure you ponder its meanings, implement its teachings and share the knowledge.

d. Meditate, which not only calms nerves, but also improves memory, attention, mood, immune system, sleep and creativity.

e. Perform physical exercises with your family members at home.

f. Get involved in any online activity, whether teaching, advising or problem solving. Since it is the responsibility of Muslims to present Islam to people of other faiths, we can use social media to impart knowledge about Islam or at least arouse people's curiosity about it.

g. Cut major sources of stress such as unnecessary spending, accumulated clutter and family misunderstandings. Forgive yourself for the past mistakes, forgive those who might have wronged you, and be proactive about creating positive future experiences.

h. Supplicate to Allah (the Almighty) as much as you can to return the situation to normal and to save us from this infectious pandemic. — Courtesy of the TIES Center

On the frontline: X-ray technician speaks her mind

By Nawara Fattahowa

Hanan Al-Tamimi is an x-ray technician at Jaber Hospital and deals with patients infected with COVID-19 daily. Kuwait Times spoke to her to learn more about her work.

Kuwait Times: What do you exactly do at the hospital?

Hanan Al-Tamimi: I do x-ray screenings for patients daily.

KT: How many hours do you work daily, and how many days a week?

Tamimi: These days I work six hours a day. I also work seven days a week - I don't have any day off due to the urgent need at the hospital.

KT: Do you think your job is hard?

Tamimi: Yes, it is exhausting. I barely have a few minutes to rest.

KT: Do you feel that you are in danger?

Tamimi: Yes, certainly, as I work directly with coronavirus patients daily. I do x-rays of more than 20 patients every day.

KT: Does the hospital provide you with complete personal protective equipment?

Tamimi: No, not a complete outfit, just the basics. So we have to buy the rest at our own expense.

KT: Has any of your colleagues been infected with the coronavirus?

Tamimi: Thank God, no one has been infected till today.

KT: When getting home every day, do you respect social distancing?

Tamimi: Yes of course. I don't get in contact with my family, and try to isolate myself as much as possible.

KT: Do they test you daily for the virus?

Tamimi: Unfortunately they don't. They say they cannot do a coronavirus test unless we show symptoms.

KT: Do you have any complaints?

Tamimi: Yes. I call upon the minister of health to let the hospital provide us at the x-ray department a complete protective uniform including the N95 facemask, which we don't have, especially since we are dealing with infected patients daily. We also demand to get tested for coronavirus at least once a week.



Hanan Al-Tamimi

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Local

Indian ambassador addresses Indian community members

By K Jeeva Sagar
Indian Ambassador to Kuwait

My dear fellow Indian citizens and friends, As India's ambassador to Kuwait, a couple of weeks ago, I addressed you through a written communication on the embassy's website, and also circulated by other print media. As things continued to evolve, I have felt I should address you again. I am aware that all of us have been going through difficult times. But difficult times are times to show courage, stay calm and resilient, and not to panic. In this effort, all of us in the Indian Embassy are with you; and I am confident that together we will fight through this, and will come out triumphant.



The most encouraging fact is that we are living in a very friendly country; Kuwait is known for its humanity and generosity. I would like to thank the Kuwaiti government for taking care of all its residents during these troubled times, including the large Indian community. The government and the health authorities of Kuwait have taken commendable steps to control the spread of the virus. I must compliment all of you for already complying with various guidelines. I once again call upon you to continue to stand by the Kuwaiti authorities in implementing the curfew, staying at home, and reporting any suspected cases immediately.

I am also aware that there is considerable need for food or groceries etc among many members of the community who may have lost their jobs and have no savings. I am grateful to various Indian associations and several community members as well as volunteers, who have either already been reaching out to the needy, or have come forward to help.

Helpline numbers have been displayed on the embassy website. Please contact us or your nearest volunteer, so that the embassy can ensure that help reaches you. Please also allow me to convey sincere appreciation to the Indian Doctors Forum and other individual Indian doctors who have voluntarily been providing medical advice and counseling. You can approach them on the contacts provided, or through the embassy, or an Indian association.

And finally dear friends, the embassy is well aware that thousands of you are keen to return to India - there are beneficiaries of amnesty, workers who have lost their jobs, those on visit visas and others needing urgent medical consultation and treatment back in India. Please be assured that the embassy is actively working both with the Kuwaiti government and the government of India on this matter.

The Indian government is sparing no effort to ensure that the process of repatriation is smooth and happens at the right time. It is in the interest of all of us. I urge you for your understanding, patience and calm assurance. Your health, your safety as well as your families' safety, is of our utmost priority and concern.

Thank you and may God bless you.

Zain delivers 'Ramadan Machla' to underprivileged families

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, delivered 'Ramadan Machla' (supplies) to be distributed to underprivileged families in Kuwait via a number of non-profit organizations. The initiative aims at serving underprivileged families' food supplies needs before the holy month of Ramadan and during the current COVID-19 crisis.

The 'Ramadan Machla' initiative is one of the main pillars of Zain's annual Ramadan campaign, which comes in line with the company's Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability strategy to serve the needs of underprivileged families in the country. Zain offered the 'Machla' via vouchers in collaboration with Oncost, one of Kuwait's biggest grocery markets, to give each family the opportunity to choose specific supplies as per their different personal needs.

Zain delivered the 'Ramadan Machla' vouchers to a number of non-profit organizations; the Kuwait Food Bank, the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor's Social Care Centers. These certified non-profit organizations will distribute the vouchers to underprivileged families in Kuwait, who may redeem them at Oncost's Qurain branch. The branch features a large collection of food and other consumer supplies.

Zain's distribution plan included the delivery of the vouchers to the biggest certified organizations across Kuwait to ensure their delivery to those in need before the arrival of the Holy Month and during the current COVID-19 crisis in order to guarantee that disadvantaged families have



enough quantities of the most basic supplies. The company hopes this initiative has a deep positive impact on the community's various segments, especially the most vulnerable ones, during such circumstances.

As part of its national commitment during this crisis, Zain recently offered over 40,000 meals in collaboration with the Kuwait Food Bank, where a large number of the meals was distributed during the week dedicated by the Ministry of Health at Kuwait International Fairgrounds in Mishref to conduct tests for residents who recently entered the country. The meals were a contribution by the company to ease the long waiting times while waiting in line. Many meals are also being continuously distributed at Kuwait International Airport's gates dedicated for residents who are returning to their countries because of this crisis.

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

Zain's Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility campaign during the Holy Month of Ramadan aims at helping less fortunate people to enjoy Ramadan happily, as well as celebrating the true spirit of the Holy month brings by supporting and launching humanitarian and charity campaigns.

CAN distributes food baskets to cancer patients

KUWAIT: Volunteers from the National Campaign for Cancer Awareness (CAN) distributed food baskets to cancer patients for the month of Ramadan. Chairman of CAN Dr Khalid Al-Saleh said this joint project between CAN and the Cancer Patients Fund at the Kuwait Society for Fighting Smoking and Cancer aims at helping with the burdens cancer patients and their families face during the extraordinary circumstances the country and the rest of the world is going through due to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Saleh said as cancer patients are among the groups that must be protected by keeping them away from crowds to avoid infection, the fund launched the food basket project for



Dr Khalid Al-Saleh

cancer patients. He said baskets were distributed by volunteers after patients registered their names to receive the aid through a direct line designated for this purpose.

No COVID-19 cases among GIs in Kuwait

KUWAIT: The US Embassy on Wednesday noted that "contrary to previous press reports, no US military individuals have tested positive for COVID-19 in Kuwait." In a press release obtained by KUNA, the embassy added: "Several contractors who worked at Camp Arifjan have tested positive and are now under the care and supervision of the ministry of health. The US government has increased its precautionary measures and is coordinating with the Kuwaiti authorities, including the ministry of health, to ensure everyone's safety and well-being. We thank the Kuwaiti government for their strong partnership, and we will continue to work together to combat the spread of COVID-19". — KUNA

Local

Interior minister vows to 'eradicate' visa trading

400,000 expats victims of visa traders • 1 death, 151 new virus cases

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh yesterday issued the strongest warning so far that the government is determined to "eradicate" the illicit visa-trading business in Kuwait, saying authorities have interrogated 1,600 victims. Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry meanwhile said at least 400,000 expat workers are victims of visa traders and called for fundamental policies and actions to find a durable solution to the crisis.

Speaking on Kuwait Television, the interior minister said interior ministry officials have interrogated at least 1,600 foreign workers who said they are victims of visa traders. He said that the interrogations took place at makeshift shelters set up for thousands of expat workers who were living illegally in the country but registered to benefit from a one-month amnesty granted by the ministry.

Saleh said that these shelters currently house some 4,000 Egyptians and an equal number of Bangladeshis, and there are others from other nationalities. "From them, we gathered names of sponsors, the way they came to the country, the sums they paid and blackmail methods," said the minister, adding that this information was given by people who are leaving the country and have nothing to lose. The minister said that more detailed information including statistics will be announced.

Saleh said that after authorities compared the information supplied by the workers with their files, they found most of the information was correct, adding that authorities will continue with their crackdown. "We feel ashamed that such type of trafficking in persons exists here and God willing, we will eradicate it from the country," said the minister, recalling that Kuwait is a country of humanity and its Amir is a leader of humanity.

Head of the Chamber Of Commerce and Industry Mohammad Al-Sager said yesterday that although legal measures are necessary and essential to punish visa traders, they must be accompanied by

policies to completely end this phenomenon. He said the problem of "marginal" expat workers dates back to more than three decades and has prospered because of huge profits divided between traders and those who facilitate this illegal business for them.

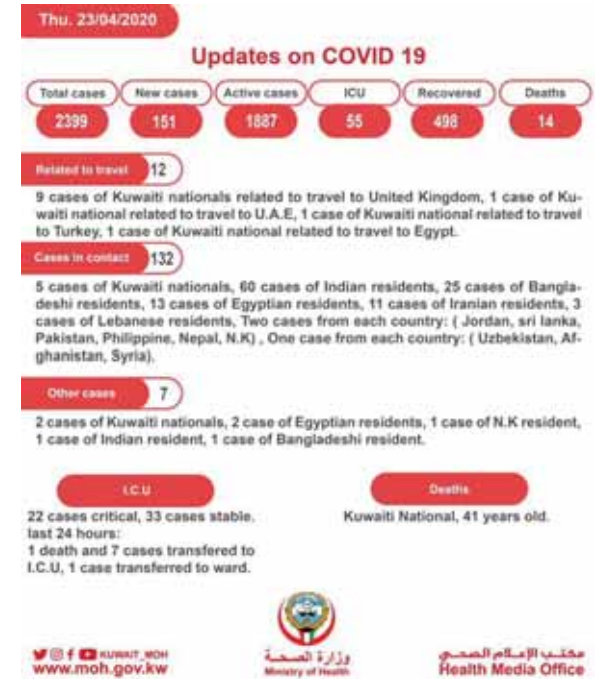
Sager said that although no credible data is available about the numbers of "marginal" expat workers, the chamber believes that at least 400,000 expats are victims of the visa trading business, which is equal to 23 percent of expatriate workers in Kuwait excluding domestic helpers.

He said in a statement that these "marginal" expat workers are divided into three groups: The first have legal residencies and contracts but don't receive salaries on a regular basis; the second type are those whose residencies are on paper companies and have no permanent jobs and seek daily work, but still pay huge sums for renewal of their permits; while the third are those who have no residency and no jobs and are mostly unskilled to do any job.

Sager said that to eradicate this phenomenon, a serious and thorough revision of the sponsorship system must be carried out in order to differentiate between high-skilled expats whose jobs can be gradually replaced by Kuwaitis and unskilled foreign workers who work in marginal jobs which Kuwaitis are unlikely to do any time in the future. Sager also said that visa trading is practiced by paper companies established exclusively for this illegal trade and by persons whose government jobs allow them to either practice this trade or act as facilitators for others. Both groups must be punished, he said.

MP Humoud Al-Otaibi said yesterday he has filed a lawsuit against those who accused him of owning a company with thousands of expat workers on it. He categorically denied he has companies or had ever worked in any business.

The health ministry yesterday reported 151 new coronavirus infections in the last 24 hours, bringing the tally to 2,399 cases, while one death was reported, taking the total number of deaths to 14.



During its daily briefing, Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said that 55 patients are in intensive care, 22 of them in critical condition. Those currently receiving treatment at hospitals reached 1,887 patients. The latest death was of a Kuwaiti citizen in his early 40s who was receiving treatment at the ICU. Earlier yesterday, Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced the recovery of 55 patients, taking the total to 498 recoveries.

Embassy dissuading Lankans from filing for govt amnesty

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Amnesty applications by undocumented Sri Lankans in Kuwait turned out to be fewer than expected after the embassy had called on its citizens not to show up as the airport in Sri Lanka is closed. The government of Kuwait has granted an amnesty from April 1-30 to all undocumented expatriates to leave at Kuwait's expense without paying fines, with a chance to return in the future. The first nationals to take advantage of the amnesty were Filipinos, followed by Egyptians, Bangladeshis and Indians. Sri Lankan nationals can apply from April 20 to 25, while all other nationals can apply from April 26 to 30, including Sri Lankans and others who couldn't apply on the earlier dates.

Sri Lankan Embassy personnel who spoke with Kuwait Times on the condition of anonymity admitted they had earlier urged all undocumented Sri Lankans not to go to the amnesty processing center as Sri Lanka is virtually locked down and no one will receive them at the airport. "We had announced earlier asking people not to come, yet there are people here, so we came just to check," an embassy official said.



KUWAIT: Sri Lankan Embassy personnel (right) and a handful of Sri Lankan applicants are seen outside the amnesty processing center in Farwaniya yesterday.

Nirosha, a Sri Lankan who was at the processing center, told Kuwait Times she is deeply frustrated by the way the Sri Lankan Embassy handled the amnesty call. "This is a very good opportunity for us to leave Kuwait. But we are not supported by the embassy. We do not have passports, but even those who have passports can be accepted, but cannot leave Kuwait because the airport in Sri Lanka is closed. They said maybe in a week or two they can leave, but I cannot leave because the embassy doesn't want to process any travel documents," she said.

Kuwait Times witnessed some applicants being allowed into the processing center, but only those with passports. "My government is not good at all...especially the people at the embassy. Why don't they support us in time of crisis," a teary Nirosha lamented. Around 130,000 Sri Lankans reside in Kuwait. According to a report in Al-Qabas daily yesterday, only 100 Sri Lankans applied for the amnesty on the second day of registration.

ALAFCO sues Boeing for \$336 million

NEW YORK: Boeing Co was sued for \$336 million on Wednesday by a Kuwaiti leasing company that accused it of wrongly refusing to return advance payments on a now-canceled order for 40 of its troubled 737 MAX planes. In a complaint filed in Chicago federal court, ALAFCO Aviation Lease and Finance Co accused Boeing of breach of contract for keeping the payments despite being unable to deliver the planes or provide a revised delivery schedule.

ALAFCO said it canceled its order on March 6 after Boeing failed to deliver nine aircraft on time. It said Boeing has resisted its claim that the problems amounted to a "non-excusable delay" that would justify repayment. Boeing did not immediately respond to requests for comment. The Chicago-based company suspended 737 MAX deliveries in March 2019, when the Federal Aviation Administration grounded the aircraft following the deaths of 346 people in crashes of two 737 MAX planes operated by Lion Air and Ethiopian Airlines.

Boeing is now also struggling with the coronavirus pandemic, which forced it to cut production because of falling demand, airline customers' own cash struggles, and the logistical hurdles of delivering aircraft. —Reuters

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Trump tells Navy to destroy Iranian gunboats if they 'harass' US ships

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'I do feel afraid': Indian workers disinfect coronavirus hotspots



SENATNI: Foreigners, who will leave Papua, line up for an health official checkup at Sentani airport in Jayapura, Papua yesterday after being ordered to be repatriated by their countries or organizations where they work due to the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. — AFP

WHO warns 'long way to go' in virus crisis

COVID-19 claims more than 180,000 lives, infects 2.6 million

GENEVA: The global coronavirus crisis will not end any time soon, with many countries still in the early stages of the fight, health experts have warned as researchers revealed the first US deaths from the disease came weeks before the alarm was raised there. The COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than 180,000 people and infected 2.6 million, and nations are struggling to check its spread with social distancing measures and lockdowns, while trying to repair their virus-ravaged economies.

Some have started to slowly ease restrictions as pressure mounts on governments to find ways to reopen their societies after tens of millions of jobs were wiped out. But World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on Wednesday cautioned that the struggle is far from over.

"Make no mistake: we have a long way to go. This virus will be with us for a long time," he said.

"Most countries are still in the early stages of their epidemics. And some that were affected early in the pandemic are now starting to see a resurgence in cases." The comments came after the director of the US Centers for Disease Control asked Americans to prepare for a second, possibly more devastating, wave of coronavirus infections.

The United States is the hardest-hit country on the planet, with more than 46,500 coronavirus deaths and nearly 840,000 infections. Researchers have now revealed that the first COVID-19 fatalities in the country happened weeks earlier than previously thought—meaning the current US tally is likely far short of reality.

The newly confirmed COVID-19 deaths on February 6 and February 17 were in California's Santa Clara county, where Stanford University researchers found that the true number cases was at least 50 times higher than the confirmed official figure. But pressure is growing on authorities to ease restrictions to boost the economy, which is reeling from the pandemic. President Donald Trump, who is keen to restart the US economy, issued rare criticism of a Republican state governor on Wednesday, after Georgia allowed small businesses to reopen. "It's too soon," the president said.

The explosion of coronavirus cases across the United States has overwhelmed healthcare facilities, from the most developed parts like New York City to the Native American territory of the Navajo Nation in the southwest, where a lack of running water and poor infrastructure has made the situation worse. "Right here in the middle of the most powerful nation, the United States of

America, our citizens don't have the luxury of turning on a faucet to wash your hands with soap and water," Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez told AFP.

Vaccine trials

The WHO and other health experts have warned that strict containment measures like lockdowns should remain until there is a viable treatment or vaccine for the coronavirus.

There was a ray of hope on that front in Europe, where Germany announced Wednesday that human trials for a vaccine will start by next week. It is only the fifth such effort to have been authorized worldwide, and is a significant step in making a vaccine "available as soon as possible", Germany's regulatory body said.

But even at the current, rapid pace of development, an effective prophylactic could be several months away. In Europe—where the death toll climbed past 110,000 — some countries have slightly eased coronavirus measures, but bans on large gatherings have been extended.

Finland said it would maintain a ban on gatherings of more than 500 people until the end of July, while hard-hit Spain said it did not expect to lift its strict lockdown until mid-May. "We must be incredibly careful in this phase," said Spanish

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez. Vietnamese authorities eased social distancing measures as cases in the country plateaued, with experts saying the apparent success was down to aggressive containment measures and contact tracing. Vietnam's Communist government has reported just 268 coronavirus cases and no deaths, despite its long and porous border with China—where the virus first emerged late last year.

'I feel helpless'

The pressure on governments everywhere to ease the economic pain is growing by the day, with tens of millions unemployed and several countries at risk of famine. With movement and travel severely restricted, sectors from small business to tourism and aviation have been hammered. Providing more evidence of the scale of devastation, the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization said Wednesday the pandemic could mean 1.2 billion fewer passengers worldwide, with hundreds of billions of dollars slashed off airline revenues. The economic suffering is intense for the people of Dharavi, the largest slum in India, who have been unable to leave home to eke out a living as factory workers or maids and chauffeurs to the well-heeled residents of Mumbai. —AFP

International

Algerians linked to protests 'forgotten' in pre-trial detention

Mothers of detainees form support group to share their hardships

ALGIERS: Dozens of Algerians linked to the country's anti-government protest movement remain "forgotten" in pre-trial detention during the coronavirus crisis, with little or no legal support.

Zinedine Hanane, 32, was arrested on March 1, 2019, in Algiers while returning from a demonstration, after two people from his neighbourhood allegedly got into a car with him.

One of them, a TV repair man, said he found a plasma television on the street after an appliance shop had been looted and took it for spare parts. All three men were arrested and accused of vandalism. The protest movement "and the justice system have forgotten them," Hanane's mother Zakia said. "And with the coronavirus, they are paying a high price for this — it's a double whammy even before judgement."

Detainees like Hanane often aren't considered part of the political opposition, and many lawyers who provide support to the anti-government protest movement — known as "Hirak" — will not represent them. Some are alleged to have been involved in altercations, thefts and looting on the margins of the protests that broke out in February 2019 against the rule of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who resigned last year.

Some of those now detained came from outside the capital Algiers, the epicentre of the movement, and their families frequently struggle

to find the money for lawyers.

Some have remained in jail while watching Hirak protesters be freed or sentenced to terms no longer than time already served. Zakia and other mothers of detainees have formed a support group to share their hardships and help each other in their fight for their children's freedom.

Although the authorities say there have been no cases of the novel coronavirus within the country's penitentiaries, relatives' anguish has increased with the pandemic and prison visits have been cancelled.

'Powerful Weapon'

"Pre-trial detention is a powerful weapon in the hands of those who criminalise political, union and community activity — and now, members of the Hirak," said Kaddour Chouicha, a human rights activist and former protest movement detainee from the northwestern city of Oran.

The justice ministry was unavailable for comment on the exact number of people in pre-trial detention. Algerian authorities have consistently avoided commenting on the matter. Civil society NGOs are split on whether many of those detained in connection with the demonstrations are prisoners of conscience or not — but agree they should not be in preventive detention.

Hakim Addad, a former prisoner and activist

(6,770) and Zimbabweans (4,049).

In addition, the health service think tank the King's Fund, calculates that beyond the NHS, around one in six of the 1.5 million people working in adult social care, in the private sector, are from overseas.

"The NHS depends on the important contribution that they (overseas workers) make," said Alex Baylis, assistant director of policy at King's. "This has come into sharp focus in recent weeks, as all NHS staff have gone above and beyond the call of duty to look after patients who are ill with coronavirus."

Foreign Staff

The contribution of the NHS, like health workers globally elsewhere, has been lauded during the coronavirus pandemic. However, in the UK the role of non-British workers, and particularly those from the European Union, has been brought into sharp focus because of Brexit, where immigration was a key issue.

Britain is reliant on such workers at a time when the future of many of those people to remain in the country is uncertain after the country left the EU in January. "Nobody has asked me where I come from in the last few weeks," said Laplana who spoke out publicly against Brexit following the 2016 referendum.

The government said on Wednesday that 69 NHS workers have died during the outbreak, including those from overseas.

They include Alice Sarupinda, a nurse from Zimbabwe, and Jenelyn Carter a healthcare assistant from the Philippines. Since the 2016 referendum set Britain on a turbulent path to leaving the EU, there have been doubts about how the NHS will cope with any potential exodus of staff as a result. — AFP



ALGIERS: File photo taken on April 14, 2019, Algerian policemen detain protesters after they demonstrated at Emir Abdelkader square in the capital Algiers. Dozens of Algerians linked to the country's anti-government protest movement remain in pre-trial detention during the coronavirus crisis, with little or no legal support. —AFP

with civic group Youth Action Rally (RAJ), a key part of the protest movement, said most Hirak lawyers have treated this group of prisoners as common-law detainees.

That is despite the fact they have been jailed over incidents linked to the demonstrations.

Some Hirak attorneys have refused to defend them, citing "professional secrecy" to conceal the

reasons for the prisoners' detention, said Lydia Lounaoui, a lawyer from the northeastern city of Bejaia.

Yazid Hadou, a protester from the northwestern city of Tlemcen, was arrested in October. Police accused him of fighting with a municipal officer ahead of the presidential election in December. — AFP

Virus highlights role of foreign staff in British hospitals

LONDON: Joan Pons Laplana is a senior digital charge nurse working on the frontline in an intensive care unit treating coronavirus patients at Sheffield Teaching Hospital in the north of England.

Like many of his colleagues in the state-run National Health Service (NHS), the 45-year-old medic is not British. The Spanish national works alongside people from Germany, Italy, Portugal, Philippines and India, as well as those from the UK.

"Sometimes the most difficult accents to understand are the British ones," Laplana, who has lived in the UK for 20 years, told AFP. The international mix of staff at Sheffield is far from untypical in British hospitals. Parliamentary figures published last July show that some 153,000 workers out of 1.2 million NHS staff are non-British.

"This is 13.1 percent of all staff for whom a nationality is known, or just over one in eight," it reported.

"Between them, these staff hold 200 different non-British nationalities. Around 65,000 are nationals of other European Union countries — 5.5 percent of NHS staff in England. Around 52,000 staff are Asian nationals, according to the parliamentary figures.

Among the most common 16 nationalities of people working for the NHS were Indian (21,207), Nigerians

First Syrian state torture trial opens in Germany

KOBLENZ: Two alleged former Syrian intelligence officers go on trial in Germany accused of crimes against humanity in the first court case worldwide over state-sponsored torture by Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Prime suspect Anwar Raslan, an alleged former colonel in Syrian state security, stands accused of carrying out crimes against humanity while in charge of the Al-Khatib detention centre in Damascus.

The 57-year-old is charged with overseeing the murder of 58 people and the torture of 4,000 others at the prison between April 29, 2011 and September 7, 2012. Fellow defendant Eyad al-Gharib, 43, is accused of being an accomplice to crimes against humanity, having helped to arrest protesters and deliver them to Al-Khatib in the autumn of 2011.

Like hundreds of thousands of other Syrians, the two men both fled their country and applied for asylum in Germany, where they were arrested in February 2019. "This trial is the first occasion on which (victims) are speaking out — not only in public, but

before a court — about what happened to them and what is still happening in Syria," said Wolfgang Kaleck, founder of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), a Berlin-based legal group supporting the plaintiffs.

Raslan and Gharib are to be tried on the principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows a foreign country to prosecute crimes against humanity. This is the only way to bring the perpetrators of Syrian state crimes to justice, as the International Criminal Court is hamstrung by vetoes from Russia and China, the ECCHR claimed.

The court is expected to hear testimonies from victims who survived what prosecutors say were "inhuman and degrading" conditions at Al-Khatib, before later escaping to Europe.

The prison's inmates, many of whom were arrested for taking part in pro-democracy demonstrations during the Arab Spring in 2011, were beaten with "fists, wires and whips" and subjected to "electric shocks", prosecutors claimed.

Others were "hung by their wrists so that only the tips of their toes were touching the ground" and "continued to be beaten in this position" or else "deprived of sleep for several days". Such "brutal acts of psychological and physical abuse" were intended to extract "confessions and information about the (Syrian) opposition", the charge sheet added. — AFP

International

With virus lockdowns, Africa gears up for remote schooling

'Home School, Teachers' Room and School on TV'

ABIDJAN: The coronavirus may not have hit Africa as badly as other parts of the world but with schools and universities closed because of mass lockdowns across the continent, many children are turning on the television to keep up with their studies.

"Home School", "Teachers' Room" and "School on TV" are just some of the distance education programmes that private channels have launched to try to compensate for the closures.

"This is to prevent COVID-19 from winning where it hurts the most, in the area of knowledge," Massamba Gueye, a teacher-researcher in Senegal, told AFP.

In Senegal, Futurs Medias, owned by the singer Youssou Ndour, gives lessons three times a day to all classes, including vocational education.

"The resumption of school... is no longer on the agenda," says the General Association of Pupils and Students of Ivory Coast (Ageeci). "The threat of a lost year is probably looming."

In neighbouring Burkina Faso, BurkinaInfo private television broadcasts four times a day for students preparing to take qualifying exams.

"We record the lessons, which we broadcast on television, basically the core subjects — mathematics, physics-chemistry, philosophy and

French," says the channel's director, Ismael Ouedraogo. Experienced teachers volunteer to teach the classes, he said.

Formats vary across the continent, with an Ivorian start-up offering courses via text messages. Free at first, it does become a paid service later. Several private African institutes and universities are exploring distance learning via the internet.

"We plan to finish the school year at the end of May," said Burkina Faso's Amed Moussa Diallo, chairman of the board of directors of the African Institute of Management, which has also set up online courses.

Pitfalls

Despite the optimism, distance learning faces several pitfalls, notably poor internet coverage in many of Africa's rural areas, and the cost. Too often, students lack the technical means and the funds to follow the courses.

"Most students do not have access to the internet, especially since many have been asked to return to their homes, often in remote locations," says professor Henry Tumwiine of the Mountains of the Moon University in Fort Portal, Uganda.

"In sub-Saharan Africa, 89 percent of learn-



ABIDJAN: A teacher teaches children at a family home in Abidjan, after the Ivorian Ministry of National Education initiated on April 9, 2020, teaching on television for primary and secondary school children following the closure of schools in the country because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

ers do not have access to home computers and 82 percent do not have internet," UNESCO said in a statement, noting a "worrying digital gap in distance learning".

"In addition, while mobile phones can allow

learners to access information and connect with each other and their teachers, around 56 million learners live in places not served by mobile networks, including nearly half in sub-Saharan Africa," UNESCO added. — AFP

African dance hit 'Pata Pata' gets reboot for virus

WASHINGTON: The world-famous song "Pata Pata", a South African dance hit from 1967, is being re-released with new lyrics to spread information about coronavirus to vulnerable communities.

Meaning "touch touch" in the Xhosa language, "Pata Pata" was written by Grammy-winning singer Miriam Makeba who named it after a dance move popular in Johannesburg at the time.

The new version sung by Beninese artist Angelique Kidjo includes lyrics such as, "We need to keep our hands clean so 'no-Pata Pata'... Don't touch your face, keep distance please and 'no-Pata Pata'".

It will be played on more than 15 radio stations across African countries on Thursday, said the U.N. Children's Agency (UNICEF), which organized the release.

"It sounds so simple and yet it's still really difficult to get information out to people in the most remote areas or to people who aren't online," said UNICEF spokesman James Elder.

"Radio does the trick every time," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. The song is also meant to spread joy in hard times, he said. It has been called "the world's most defiantly joyful song" because it represented revelry under apartheid South Africa. — AFP

Locked-down Niger braces for violence as Ramadan approaches

NIAMEY: With the holy Muslim month of Ramadan set to start this weekend, authorities in Niger are fearing violence after several cities saw riots over anti-coronavirus lockdowns banning collective prayers.

"We just want to pray in our mosques, without violence... we are determined to exercise our religious right," Hassane Dari, a young trader in the rundown district of Lazaret in the capital Niamey, told AFP. In nearby Banizoumbou, housewife Hadja Aissa said: "They want to keep us from praying during the holy month of Ramadan? It's not going to happen!"

Such discontent began stirring a month ago in the deeply Muslim semi-desert country as the government began imposing measures to fight the coronavirus pandemic, notably closing down mosques. More than 300 people have been arrested in recent days in the run-up to Ramadan in the impoverished former French colony, with rioters torching cars and buildings and setting up roadblocks.

The lockdown has been imposed despite a relatively low COVID-19 toll in the country — officially 20 deaths from 657 cases as of Tuesday. In addition to border closures, a state of emergency and a curfew, mosques have been closed as well as schools, and Niamey has been shut off from the rest of the country. The government announced late Wednesday an easing of the curfew in Niamey, saying it would now be in effect from 9 pm until 5 am (2000 GMT and 0400 GMT) instead of 7 pm until 6 am.

But the government statement did not say whether collective prayers would be allowed again in the mosques, as some worship-

pers hope. Riots broke out first in the central town of Mirrya on March 23 when youths wielding clubs and knives torched buildings and vehicles, according to authorities.

A week later in the western region of Tahoua, protesters took to the streets of Illela, setting fire to the town hall and personal property. Dozens of protesters were taken into custody in the two incidents, authorities said.

Unrest has since surged in Niamey, notably late Sunday when around 10 neighbourhoods including Lazaret and Banizoumbou "erupted," the city's governor Issaka Assane Karanta said on state television Tuesday.

He charged that "organised individuals" flouting the curfew "burned tyres and attacked private property."

At least 108 demonstrators were arrested in a first wave of protests from Friday to Sunday, police said, adding that 10 were being held in Koutoukale high-security jail around 50 kilometres (30 miles) from Niamey.

Another 166 people were arrested late Monday, police said Wednesday, describing scenes of protesters burning tyres and using lamp posts to set up roadblocks. Images of further protests in parts of the city of 1.5 million late Tuesday were posted on Facebook.

Authorities and influential traditional chiefs have issued calls for restraint. The faithful need not attend mosque to pray, President Mahamadou Issoufou said on television last week. "Flee contagious diseases as you would flee a lion. Don't bring infected people and healthy people together — they must be separate."

On Saturday, the country's top religious body, the Niger Islamic Council, urged people to show "resilience" and avoid flocking to the mosques "simply to protecting oneself and others".

The council said "all preventive measures will be maintained... as long as the chain of contamination (of new coronavirus) lasts." Near a mosque in Danzama-Koira district, local resident Allassane Issa told AFP he expected an easing of the curfew and a reopening of mosques during Ramadan "to prevent an upsurge in violence". — AFP

International

Divided EU leaders meet on coronavirus recovery plan

BRUSSELS: EU leaders are set to haggle yesterday over a giant package to help their economies recover from the coronavirus pandemic, but bitter divisions mean little progress is expected.

The situation facing the EU is dire: more than 110,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths and an economy set to shrink by 7.1 percent because of the lockdown. But while the 27 members agree that a stimulus running into hundreds of billions of euros will be needed, they are split over the details — in particular how it should be funded.

The leaders will meet by videolink to discuss the virus crisis for the fourth time in seven weeks — a sign, one senior Brussels official said, of the “seriousness of the challenge and the importance we attach to a common solution”.

But common ground is scarce. The pandemic has reopened the wounds of the 2009 financial crisis, once again pitting northern and southern Europe against one another. Southern states like Spain and Italy, badly hit by the disease and heavily indebted, are demanding “solidarity” — financial help — from the rich north.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who has pushed for mutualised EU debt, dubbed “coronabonds”, struck a firm line on Tuesday. He told the Italian parliament he would accept “no compromises” and would not sign up to a “bar-

gain deal”. On the other side, northern countries led by Germany and the Netherlands refuse even to entertain the idea of coronabonds and are reluctant to fund Mediterranean governments they accuse of profligacy.

In a sign of how far apart they are, leaders will not even issue their usual joint statement after the videoconference, a diplomat told AFP. “No one should have exaggerated expectations for this meeting,” another diplomat said.

SPANISH PROPOSAL

Spain has proposed creating grants rather than loans to help badly affected countries, funded by “perpetual EU debt” that would be backed by the bloc’s long-term budget.

Madrid argues that this approach would avoid saddling already weakened national economies with yet more loans. But the idea looks likely to be a non-starter. One senior diplomat said their country would “never agree” to the idea.

EU Council President Charles Michel, the nominal host of the summit, set a low bar in the invitation letter sent to leaders on Tuesday. He urged them only to “work towards” creating a European Recovery Fund to rebuild the bloc’s economy after the pandemic eases.

The leaders are expected to ask the Euro-



BRUSSELS: The European High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell attends a video conference with European Foreign Ministers in Brussels, Belgium, during a strict lockdown in the country aimed at curbing the spread of the novel coronavirus. — AFP

pean Commission, the bloc’s executive, to analyse the probable needs and come back with a proposal. They will also sign off on a 540-bil-

lion-euro (\$584-billion) emergency package agreed by EU finance ministers earlier this month. — AFP

For Russians, humble dacha provides refuge from coronavirus

SOKOLNIKI: After years spent on submarines with Russia’s Northern Fleet, Ivan Chernyshyov is having no problem adjusting to life on coronavirus lockdown — especially as, like many Russians, the retired sailor can escape to the countryside.

“It’s good here. We’ll grow carrots and strawberries and maybe even some potatoes,” the 78-year-old says, while his wife Lyudmila trims rose bushes in the garden of their country home outside Moscow.

With half the world on some form of lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic, countless millions of city dwellers are stuck inside, with only the occasional trip out to relieve their isolation. But Russians like the Chernyshyovs have another option: escaping to their dachas, small countryside homes that were parcelled out to city workers in Soviet times.

Generations of Muscovites have spent their weekends and summer breaks in dacha settlements, usually an hour or two outside the city, made up of rows of humble brick or wooden houses and vegetable patches.

And with the number of coronavirus cases on the rise — Russia had registered some 58,000 as of Wednesday — dachas have become a welcome refuge. “It’s the great outdoors, we can walk in nature without wearing a mask,” says Arina Bannikova, a 26-year-old architect who is at her dacha in Sokolniki, a small settlement an hour’s drive northwest from Moscow, with her mother, sister, another family of four, a dog and two cats. Barrelling past on his scooter, 11-year-old

Maxime couldn’t be happier. “Here I’ve got all the space I want,” he shouts. Nearly half of Russia’s population is estimated to have a dacha, so when authorities began imposing lockdown measures on Moscow last month, thousands streamed out of the city.

Online searches for dacha rentals also soared, with nearly five times as many requests as usual in the first two weeks of April, according to figures from real estate portal Cian.ru.

A COMEBACK FOR COUNTRYSIDE?

“It’s interesting because these last 10 years were marked by a serious crisis for the dacha,” says Mikhail Alekseevsky, a Russian anthropologist who has made a study of the country homes. “A lot of people are suddenly remembering that they have a dacha and starting urgent repairs — with the priority the installation of a good internet connection.”

Dachas had been hugely popular in Soviet times and after the 1991 collapse of the USSR, when many used their vegetable patches to make up for food shortages. But as Russia’s economy grew in the 2000s and early 2010s, many abandoned their countryside getaways to spend weekends at new restaurants and cinemas in the city, or to travel abroad. Notorious weekend traffic jams to dacha country didn’t help.

The proportion of Russians with a dacha has been falling, with pollster VTSIOM saying it dropped from 46 percent in 2014 to 42 percent last year. “In the USSR, the dacha was a way to escape Soviet reality. But in a globalised world there are sometimes more interesting things to do than work in a vegetable patch,” Alekseevsky says.

With the coronavirus, the other entertainment options are no longer available. And dacha residents say being in the countryside makes it easier to follow isolation rules. “I can’t say we are completely sheltered (from the virus). But I feel 90 percent safe here,” says Nataliya Sapiga, a 53-year-old school teacher, at her dacha in Sokolniki. — AFP

UK unveils study to track virus

LONDON: The British government announced plans yesterday for a major study to track coronavirus in the general population, with as many as 300,000 people expected to take part within a year.

In a first phase, a representative sample of 25,000 people will be regularly tested using self-administered nose and throat swabs, to establish if they currently have COVID-19.

Regular blood samples will also be taken from adults from around 1,000 households to help assess how many people have developed antibodies. Initial findings could be available in early May, the health ministry said, and would likely inform the government’s decisions on how to ease a month-long nationwide lockdown imposed to stem the spread of the virus.

Britain is one of the worst-hit countries in the global pandemic, with 18,100 deaths recorded so far in hospitals alone. Testing for coronavirus infection is currently largely restricted to frontline health and care workers in Britain, although ministers have vowed to ramp this up in the coming weeks.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the large-scale survey “will help to track the current extent of transmission and infection in the UK, while also answering crucial questions about immunity”.

“Together, these results will help us better understand the spread of the virus to date, predict the future trajectory and inform future action we take, including, crucially, the development of ground-breaking new tests and treatments,” he said.

The chief medical officer for England, Chris Whitty, said on Wednesday that there is not yet a reliable antibody test to establish whether someone has had coronavirus in the past. “We do not yet have a test that is as good as we would want,” he said, but added that he hoped it would be developed in the “pretty near future”. — AFP

International

Trump tells Navy to destroy Iranian gunboats if they 'harass' US ships

President order temporarily limits US immigration during coronavirus crisis

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump said on Wednesday he had instructed the US Navy to fire on any Iranian ships that harass it at sea, but said later he was not changing the military's rules of engagement. Close interactions with Iranian military vessels were not uncommon in 2016 and 2017. On several occasions, US Navy ships fired warning shots at Iranian vessels when they got too close.

"I have instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea," Trump wrote in a tweet, hours after Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps said it had launched the country's first military satellite into orbit. While the Navy has the authority to act in self-defense, Trump's comments appeared to go further and were likely to stoke tensions between Iran and the United States.

In a briefing at the White House later on Wednesday, Trump said the military would not be changing its rules of engagement. "We're covered, we're covered 100 percent," Trump said. Senior Pentagon officials said that Trump's comments on Iran were meant as a warning to Tehran, but suggested that the US military would continue to abide by its existing right to self-defense instead of any changes to its rules.

"The president issued an important warning to the Iranians, what he was emphasizing is all of our ships retain the right of self-defense," Deputy Secretary of Defense David Norquist told reporters at the Pentagon.

The United States should focus on saving its military from the coronavirus, an Iranian armed forces spokesman said on Wednesday. Earlier this month, the US military said 11 vessels from the IRGCN came close to US Navy and Coast Guard ships in the Gulf, calling the moves "dangerous and provocative." At one point, the Iranian vessels came within 10 yards (9 m) of the US Coast Guard cutter Maui. While such interactions at sea occurred occasionally a few years ago, they had stopped recently. Tensions between Iran and the United States increased earlier this year after the United States killed Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, in a drone strike in Iraq.

Iran retaliated on Jan. 8 with a rocket attack on Iraq's Ain al-Asad base where US forces were stationed. No US troops were killed or faced immediate bodily injury, but more than 100 were later diagnosed with traumatic brain injury. President Donald Trump on Wednesday ordered a temporary block on some foreigners from permanent



WASHINGTON, DC: US President Donald Trump speaks during the daily briefing of the coronavirus task force at the White House on Wednesday in Washington, DC. — AFP

residence in the United States, saying he wanted to protect American workers and jobs during the coronavirus pandemic. The order, an election-year move likely to prove popular with his conservative base, is to last for 60 days and then will be reviewed and possibly extended. It

is likely to face legal challenges. Some critics saw Republican Trump's announcement as a move to take advantage of the coronavirus crisis to implement a long-sought policy goal of barring more immigrants in line with his "America first" platform. — Agencies

Canada provinces seek military help

OTTAWA: Canada's Ontario and Quebec provinces on Wednesday asked for the military to help overwhelmed staff at elderly care homes hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

The requests came as Canada surpassed 2,000 COVID-19 deaths—half of them at long-term care facilities. Ontario Premier Doug Ford said soldiers are needed at five of the most affected care homes in the province, saying the coronavirus in these places is spreading like a "raging wildfire."

Ford did not specify how many troops were needed.

There have been 448 deaths at 128 of Ontario's care homes that reported outbreaks.

In Quebec, 4,000 elderly people living in retirement homes have been infected, representing more than eight out of 10 of the COVID-19 deaths in the province. Quebec Premier Francois Legault told a news conference that he'd asked Ottawa to send 1,000 troops. This is in addition to 130 military doctors and medics previously requested as reinforcements. Only half of those have been deployed so far. "It will help us a lot to have lots of extra hands to do tasks that are less medical and help the staff," Legault said. Ottawa was expected to respond to both provinces' requests later. Quebec tried to quickly recruit 2,000 new staff for its long-term care facilities in recent weeks to ease the workload for existing staff struggling with coronavirus outbreaks, but only 350 have applied so far, the premier said. — AFP

Bogota supermarkets safe spaces for women to report abuse

BOGOTA: Women in Colombia's capital city facing domestic abuse can seek help in hundreds of supermarkets and pharmacies as part of a new campaign launched on Wednesday to tackle the rise in gender violence under the coronavirus lockdown. The program involves more than 630 supermarkets from three different chains and the Farmatodo pharmacies in Bogota where store managers are being trained in how to respond to women seeking help and how to contact the police.

Bogota, a city of 8 million people, and the rest of the country have been in strict lockdown since late March in a bid to stem the spread of the coronavirus that has infected about 4,350 people and killed at least 200 across Colombia. Domestic violence should not be regarded as a problem that goes on "behind closed doors," said Diana Rodriguez, head of women's affairs at the Bogota mayor's office that came up with the initiative.

"We launched a new strategy #SafeSpaces, so that women who are experiencing violence in the home can report this and be helped," she said in a statement. "No woman should have to stay with her aggressor, institutions are ready to support women. We should be at home but in homes without violence," she said.

Posters about the campaign have been placed on shop windows and advertised on social media.

Women at home with their abusers during lockdown find it hard to call for help, while tensions over the simplest household chores to weightier concerns like losing a job can easily escalate into violence, experts say. In Bogota, the government-run domestic abuse hotline has received an average of 471 calls and



Cucuta: A woman looks at merchandise outside a supermarket in Cucuta, Colombia. — Reuters

WhatsApp messages a day - a 160 percent increase since the quarantine started. Across Colombia, 13 women have been murdered since the lockdown started, many killed by their boyfriends or husbands in their homes, government figures show. Countries worldwide have reported increases in domestic violence under coronavirus lockdowns, a development the United Nations has described as a growing "shadow pandemic." In Latin America where a macho culture fuels violence against women, governments including Chile, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia have expanded hotlines, added messaging services and kept shelters and family courts open to help victims.

In Buenos Aires, where calls to the government-run abuse helpline have risen by 60 percent during the lockdown, an initiative was introduced for women to use the code word "red mask" to report domestic violence to pharmacists. Similar initiatives have been adopted in Spain and France. — Reuters

International

Pompeo renews criticism of China over virus but welcomes supplies

Chinese foreign ministry denies allegations

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hit out at Beijing again on Wednesday over the coronavirus outbreak and accused it of taking advantage of the pandemic to bully neighbors, even as he welcomed China's provision of essential medical supplies. Pompeo told a news briefing that the United States "strongly believed" Beijing had failed to report the outbreak in a timely manner, in breach of World Health Organization rules, and had failed to report human-to-human transmission of the virus "for a month until it was in every province inside of China."

Pompeo also said China had halted testing of new virus samples, "destroyed existing samples" and failed to share samples with the outside world, "making it impossible to track the disease's evolution."

The Trump administration has repeatedly criticized China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak, which began late last year in the Chinese city of Wuhan and has grown into a global pandemic. The outbreak has killed around 180,000 people globally, including more than 45,000 in the United States, according to a Reuters tally. Even after Beijing notified the WHO of the outbreak, Pompeo said, "It did not share all of the information it had. Instead it covered up how dangerous the disease is."

President Donald Trump last week suspended US funding of the WHO, accusing the UN agency of promoting China's "disinformation" about the outbreak. WHO officials have denied this and China has said it has been transparent and open. Pompeo said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom failed to use his

ability "to go public" when a member state failed to follow the rules. He said the WHO had an obligation to ensure safety standards were observed in virology labs in Wuhan and its director-general had "enormous authority with respect to nations that do not comply."

Pompeo repeated allegations that China was exploiting the world's focus on the pandemic with "provocative behavior" to erode autonomy in Hong Kong, exert military pressure on Taiwan and coerce neighbors in the South China Sea.

"The United States strongly opposes China's bullying, we hope other nations will hold them to account," he said.

China's Foreign Ministry denied the US allegations yesterday. "One or two people in the US are confusing right and wrong and sowing discord on these issues. These schemes will not prevail," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang. Pompeo also expressed concern over a US government-funded study that said China's Mekong River dams held back large volumes of water during a drought in downstream countries last year despite China having higher-than-average water levels upstream. Beijing has disputed the study's findings.

The Secretary of State spoke later on Wednesday with counterparts from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and said the United States has called on China to close its wildlife wet markets permanently, citing links between the markets and zoonotic diseases, which can jump from animals to humans. The novel coronavirus is believed to have emerged in such

How can US secure specialized minerals without China

MOUNTAIN PASS, Calif: The United States wants to curb its reliance on China for specialized minerals used to make weapons and high-tech equipment, but it faces a Catch-22.

It only has one rare earths mine - and government scientists have been told not to work with it because of its Chinese ties. The mine is southern California's Mountain Pass, home to the world's eighth-largest reserves of the rare earths used in missiles, fighter jets, night-vision goggles and other devices.

But the US Department of Energy (DOE) has told government scientists not to collaborate with the mine's owner, MP Materials, the DOE's Critical Materials Institute told Reuters. This is because MP Materials is almost a tenth-owned by a Chinese investor and relies heavily on Chinese sales and technical know-how, according to the company.

"Clearly, the MP Materials ownership structure

is an issue," said Tom Lograsso, interim director of the institute, the focal point of the US government's rare earths research and a facility that typically works closely with private industry. "We're going to allow the people in Washington to figure this out." The DOE instruction, which has not been previously reported, illustrates the competing pressures facing officials looking to resurrect the U.S. commercial rare earths industry, which has all but disappeared since its genesis in World War Two's Manhattan Project to develop the atomic bomb. Lograsso did not say how the guidance was delivered to the institute.

Reviving domestic rare earths production has become a priority in Washington as relations with China, which dominates global supplies, have become increasingly frayed and US lawmakers warn of the dangers of relying on a competitor for critical defense components. Even as the DOE has blacklisted MP Materials, the company is a candidate to receive up to \$40 million in funding from the Pentagon to produce light rare earths, according to two sources familiar with the matter. Light rare earths are the most-commonly used of the specialized materials.

The Pentagon has yet to announce its decision on that funding, which could go to more than one project, after delaying the decision from March due



WASHINGTON, DC: In this file photo taken on November 09, 2018 US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Chinese politburo member Yang Jiechi shake hands following a press conference in the Benjamin Franklin Room of the State Department in Washington, DC. — AFP

a market in Wuhan late last year.

While the Trump administration has stepped up criticism of China as the pandemic worsens, the crisis has exposed US reliance on China for essential medical supplies.

Asked about recent reports that supplies were being held up in China, Pompeo said: "The good news is we have seen China provide those resources; sometimes they're from US companies that are there in China, but we've had success. ... We appreciate that.

to the coronavirus crisis. Late Wednesday, MP Materials said it had been awarded Pentagon funding for a facility to process heavy rare earths, a less-common type of the specialized minerals. The amount was not disclosed, but the funds will be used for planning and design work. MP will have to solicit the Pentagon again for construction-related funds.

MP Materials is by far the most advanced player in the US rare earths industry, given no rival project has even broken ground. As such, Mountain Pass is widely seen by industry analysts as a front-runner for Pentagon funding.

The DOE did not respond to requests for comment on the instruction to scientists or any potential conflict with Pentagon policy. The Pentagon is working closely with "the president, Congress, allies, partners and the industrial base to mitigate U.S. reliance on China for rare earth minerals," said spokesman Lt Col Mike Andrews. The department did not respond to requests for comment on whether it might fund Mountain Pass or potential conflicts with DOE policy.

Apple to Lockheed

MP Materials, which bought the mine in 2017, describes itself as an American-controlled company with a predominantly US workforce. The pri-

"We are counting on China to continue to live up to its contractual obligations and international obligations to provide that assistance to us and to sell us those goods ... in a way consistent with all of the international trade rules."

White House adviser Peter Navarro, like Pompeo a persistent critic of Beijing, charged on Monday that China may be withholding data about early coronavirus infections because it wants to win the commercial race to create a vaccine. —Reuters

vately held firm is 9.9%-owned by China's Shenghe Resources Holding Co, though, and Chinese customers account for all its annual revenue of about \$100 million. "Had we not had a Chinese technical partner helping us do this relaunch, there's no way this could have been done," said James Litinsky, chief executive of JHL Capital Group LLC, a Chicago-based hedge fund and MP Materials' majority owner.

Litinsky declined to comment on the Pentagon funding. Asked for comment on the DOE instruction to scientists, Litinsky said: "MP is on a mission to restore the full rare earth supply chain to the United States of America, whether the government helps us or not."

Shenghe did not respond to requests for comment. MP Materials is among a slew of US companies dependent on China's rare earths industry. Apple Inc uses Chinese rare earths in its iPhone's taptic engine, which makes the phone vibrate. Lockheed Martin Corp uses them to make the F-35 Lightning fighter jet. General Dynamics Corp uses them to build the Virginia-class submarine. The COVID-19 pandemic has further driven home the global nature of supply chains and just how heavily Western countries rely on manufacturing powerhouse China for a host of key products, including drug ingredients. —Reuters

International

China to give WHO \$30 million more after US freezes funds

Chinese citizen journalist resurfaces after going missing in Wuhan

BEIJING: China announced yesterday it will donate another \$30 million to the World Health Organization to help in the global fight against the coronavirus pandemic, days after Washington said it would freeze funding. "China has decided to donate another \$30 million in cash to the WHO, in addition to the previous donation of \$20 million, to support the global fight against COVID-19 and strengthen developing countries' health systems," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told a regular press briefing.

He added that China's contribution to the UN agency "reflects the support and trust of the Chinese government and people for the WHO".

The US, which is the WHO's biggest contributor, accused the WHO last week of "mismanaging" the COVID-19 crisis, drawing ire from Beijing as both countries spar over the deadly virus. In announcing the funding freeze last week, US President Donald Trump accused the WHO of covering up the seriousness of the COVID-19 outbreak in China before it spread. Trump said US taxpayers provided between \$400 million and \$500 million per year to the WHO, while "in contrast, China contributes roughly \$40 million a year and even less".

Meanwhile, a Chinese citizen journalist who posted videos about the coronavirus situation in the city of Wuhan has resurfaced after going missing for almost two months, saying in a YouTube video that he had been forcibly quar-

antined. Li Zehua, 25, was one of three citizen journalists who went missing in Wuhan.

A video he published on Feb. 20 showed temporary porters being hired to transport corpses of people who apparently died of the coronavirus. It was viewed 850,000 times on YouTube, which is blocked in China. Days later, he posted live video footage of the police coming to his home. He was then not heard of until his new video was posted on Wednesday.

The other two citizen journalists, Chen Qiushi and Fang Bin, who according to media reports posted footages of overwhelmed hospitals and corpses piled in a minibus, have not resurfaced publicly.

Chen's mother said earlier he was missing while Fang also posted video of the police knocking on his door. Chinese authorities made no public comment on any of the three. US congressman Jim Banks called in March 31 on the US State Department to urge China to investigate the disappearance of the three. Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying dismissed Banks' call at the time, saying it was "totally based on trumped up messages and information".

Li, in his new video posted on Wednesday, said police took him from his apartment in Wuhan on Feb. 26 and questioned him at a police station on suspicion of disrupting public order. He said that after nearly 24 hours, the police station chief told him he would not be charged but must un-



BEIJING: A woman wearing a face mask visits a book store on World Book Day in Beijing yesterday.—AFP

dergo quarantine because he had been to high-risk areas, such as a crematorium. Li said he was quarantined in a hotel until March 14, and then escorted to his hometown, where he was quarantined for another 14 days. He said police had required that he give his electronic devices to a friend while he was in quarantine. It is not clear why Li chose to post the new video recounting his experience, which he said was made on April

16, three weeks after his last quarantine ended.

Li did not immediately respond to a request for comment and Wuhan police could not immediately be reached for comment yesterday. In the YouTube video recorded in late February, moments before Li opened the door to let police in, the former state television employee spoke about his ambition to speak up on behalf of the people.—Reuters

Pakistani does urge govt to reimpose mosque restrictions

KARACHI: Leading Pakistani doctors on Wednesday urged the government and clerics to reverse a decision to allow prayer congregations at mosques during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, warning that the spread of coronavirus could spiral out of control.

Pakistan on Saturday lifted precautionary restrictions on congregational prayers. The decision came three days after clerics said such limitations were not acceptable and after several incidents of clashes between police and worshippers. Congregations increase in size during Ramadan, which is expected to begin on Friday in Pakistan. "Unfortunately, our rulers have made a wrong decision; our clerics have shown a non-serious attitude," Dr Qaiser Sajjad, secretary-general of the Pakistan Medical Association, told a news conference

hastily convened by the doctors.

Pakistan, the world's second most populous Muslim country after Indonesia, has reported more than 10,000 cases of the coronavirus, including 212 deaths. Both the government and experts say the peak for infections is expected to hit in May.

Last week, Pakistan extended a nationwide lockdown for two weeks, but eased restrictions on some activities, including key industrial production and mosques.

The doctors said a 20-point standard operating procedure for mosques agreed between the government and religious leaders was not practical or implementable. Another doctor at the news conference, Dr Saad Niaz, said coronavirus facilities in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, had already reached maximum capacity.—Reuters

Japan towns offer masks as reward for tax donation

TOKYO: Japanese towns offer popular local specialties from wagyu beef to tuna as gifts to citizens who donate money in a special tax scheme, but the coronavirus pandemic has made masks this year's must-have item. People have been giving up to 7,000 yen (\$65) in return for a "gift" of locally-produced reusable linen and cotton masks, said an official in the central Japanese town in Aisho. "I was surprised. There have been many donations since we began to offer the masks on April 1," Aisho town official Junki Urabe told AFP.

Urabe said that about 100 donations have been made for masks in the past week, while popular local blueberries only attracted 20. "Our local beef and rice are also still popular, but I feel masks are in high demand due to the virus outbreak," said Urabe.

Under the special system, people can donate to municipalities and prefectures of their choice to become eligible for deductions in their income and residential taxes.

In return, the regions also offer local products—such as quality beef or expensive fruit—in the hope of attracting

contributions. 'State of emergency'. Launched in 2008, the scheme has grown from gathering 8.1 billion yen in donations to 512.7 billion yen in 2018, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

It has sparked local rivalry, with towns competing to offer precious gifts, prompting the central government to limit the value of rewards. Muroto city in western Kochi prefecture has also seen strong demand for cotton masks made with local indigo dye—available for a cool 9,500 yen.

"We started giving out the masks for donors since last year, but donations have increased since coronavirus," city official Shinya Katsuta said. Disposable surgical masks made with non-woven fabric—commonly worn during Japan's flu and pollen seasons—have become extremely scarce due to high demand and a shortage of raw materials amid the pandemic.

Electronic maker Sharp, which has been producing masks for medical facilities after a government request, announced this week that individuals could also buy their surgical masks at the price of 3,000 yen for 50. Japan is under a nationwide state of emergency with people urged to refrain from travelling from the cities to their home regions during the forthcoming Golden Week holidays.

And some cities have taken to offering homesick would-be travellers gifts to encourage them to stay at home. A city in northern Niigata prefecture handed out a free five-kilo (11-pound) bag of rice and a handmade mask to students there who are staying put rather than travelling home to families.—AFP

'I do feel afraid': Indian workers disinfect coronavirus hotspots

Over 20,000 infected in India, death toll reaches 652

NEW DELHI: One recent morning in his two-room New Delhi home, sanitation worker Dev Dutt Sharma drank tea before putting on an orange jacket and bidding goodbye to his two sons, wife, and elderly mother. He rode his motorbike to government offices in South Delhi, where he suited up in protective gear and strapped a container full of disinfectant on his back.

Then he ventured out to disinfect some of Delhi's crowded slums and neighborhoods deemed at risk from the coronavirus, which has infected more than 20,000 people and killed 652 in India. "I do feel afraid, because I have a family,"

said Sharma, 38, who is one of more than 3,500 workers usually tasked with combating malaria for the South Delhi Municipal Corporation.

"But then I think that, along with my own family, I will also save other families." The plight of India's under-protected medical workers has drawn widespread attention, but workers disinfecting cities are also at risk as they venture into designated containment zones. "Wherever we

get more than three or four cases from a single locality, we are taking special measures in those areas," said N.R. Tuli, a doctor in charge of disinfections in a South Delhi area.

Such measures boost sanitation and strengthen awareness of government actions, said virologist Shahid Jameel. "The latter increases the level of trust that is so important for people to follow instructions," added Jameel, the chief executive of health charity the Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance. India's population of 1.3 billion has been subjected to one of the world's toughest lockdowns,

confining people to their homes except for trips to buy food and medicine until May 3. To help rein in the virus, Sharma disinfects as many as 80 homes a day. But when the work ends, anxiety returns to haunt him.

"When I come back home, I also feel, 'What if this virus is inside me and might get transmitted to my children?'," he said. "But we are helpless, we have to perform our duty." — Reuters



India's people endure tough lockdown



HYDERABAD: Migrant workers from the state of Madhya Pradesh carrying their belongings wait to board a bus as Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation authorities shift them to a temporary shelter during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Hyderabad yesterday. — AFP

Trump, Khan discuss coordination against COVID-19

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday discussed the global coronavirus pandemic and efforts to blunt its spread, the White House and the Pakistani leader's office said. The two also discussed the US-led effort to bring peace to Afghanistan, Khan's office said in a statement distributed by the Pakistani embassy.

Trump and Khan spoke by telephone following talks last week that US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad held with Taliban negotiators in Doha and Pakistani officials in Islamabad on the stalled peace process. A Feb. 29 US-Taliban deal for a phased US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan called for the opening by March 10 of intra-Afghan negotiations on a settlement to decades of war. But differences between Kabul and the Taliban over prisoner releases, a feud between Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his main political rival, and a

surge in Taliban attacks have stalled the peace initiative, raising concerns it could collapse as the coronavirus spreads. US officials say Pakistan wields considerable influence over the Taliban by providing the militants with sanctuary on its side of the border and other support. Pakistan denies those allegations.

In his call with Trump, Khan "reaffirmed Pakistan's support for facilitation of the Afghan peace process and underscored the importance of next steps leading to the earliest commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations," the Pakistani statement said. Afghanistan and Pakistan, impoverished countries with poor healthcare systems, are confronting growing cases and deaths from COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus. The United States, also fighting rising cases and deaths, last week announced more than \$8 million of aid to help Pakistan battle the pandemic.

Trump and Khan "discussed developments in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and agreed to continue working together on a coordinated response to defeat the virus and minimize its economic impact," White House spokesman Judd Deere said. The Pakistani statement said Trump reassured Khan "of US support to Pakistan in the efforts to combat COVID-19 including by making available ventilators as well as in the economic arena." — Reuters

2 SpiceJet lessors in talks to reclaim planes over missed payments

NEW DELHI/SINGAPORE: Two lessors to Indian carrier SpiceJet Ltd are in talks to terminate contracts and repossess planes via mutually agreed deals with the airline over missed payments, according to two sources directly involved in the discussions. One of the leasing companies started to pull out a few planes earlier this year after SpiceJet failed to pay maintenance fees due since late last year and lease rentals since last month, said one source, adding that talks were continuing over other jets.

The second lessor began discussions, which are ongoing, last month just as the coronavirus pandemic started crippling the airline industry, according to the second source.

About 10 planes in total have been or could be repossessed, with leases terminated with the airline's agreement, according to the sources, who declined to be named due to the sensitivity of the matter.

A SpiceJet spokesman described queries related to the discussions with lessors as "speculative, misleading and baseless". "We share

excellent relationships with all our partners and lessors and our agreements with them are confidential," he added.

"Our fleet structure and exits have been planned exits at our option to cater to the demand requirements," he said, adding SpiceJet was taking various steps to re-align its operations with current travel restrictions worldwide. The carrier did not comment on specific queries about dues owed to lessors or delays in making payments. SpiceJet is not alone in wrestling with the impact of the coronavirus crisis, which has seen airlines worldwide seeking delays in rent and deliveries or state help. Estimated global airline losses from the coronavirus pandemic have climbed to \$314 billion, trade body IATA said last week.

Avolon, a leading global lessor, said this month it had received requests from more than 80% of its customers for relief from payment obligations.

The two sources said the lease talks were instigated by the lessors but early termination deals would be mutually agreed with SpiceJet. The second leasing company is in talks with the carrier to repossess a handful of Boeing 737 planes, also citing delayed payments, said the second source.

SpiceJet had a 119-strong fleet at the end of 2019. Its two-dozen lessors include Carlyle Aviation Partners, Aircastle and Avolon, according to industry data provider Cirium. Carlyle and Avolon declined to comment, while there was no response from Aircastle. — Reuters

International

Pastor helps keep Singapore's migrant workers fed during COVID-19 lockdown

Singapore NGOs deliver 7,000 meals a day to quarantined workers

SINGAPORE: Pastor Samuel Gift Stephen spends his days trying to ensure migrant workers in Singapore, confined to cramped dormitories due to an outbreak of coronavirus, all remain well fed.

He runs one of a number of non-governmental organizations working with authorities and employers to deliver meals to dormitories where workers are either under government quarantine or ordered to stay home to curb transmission of the disease. Singapore has seen a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases to over 10,000 infections this week, the vast majority from dormitories where workers mainly from Bangladesh and India live in bunk rooms each housing 12 to 20 men.

The government has said employers are required to provide sufficient food for workers during this lockdown period, but it is also working with NGOs like Stephen's Alliance of Guest Workers Outreach (AGWO) to make up any shortfalls. "Employers are supposed to provide catered food to their employees. And the truth to the matter is that...some of them don't have the muscle power, they don't have the financial power because of this financial crunch," Stephen, chairman of AGWO, said as he un-

loaded bags of plastic containers from the back of a van to dormitories on Wednesday.

The mainly South Asian workers receiving the meals, many wearing traditional saris wrapped around their waists, stood nearby queuing up to see health workers wearing masks, blue scrubs and plastic shields covering their faces. Dormitories with large numbers of infections have been put under government-ordered quarantines in recent weeks, and on Tuesday the government said all foreign construction workers must stay home for two weeks.

Stephen said his organization arranges for caterers to cook and deliver meals at least twice a day for certain dormitories - an initiative funded by charitable donations. The Ministry of Manpower has previously said that NGOs like AGWO are helping deliver 7,000 meals a day to workers.

Dormitory operators have welcomed the initiative, which they say is helping them over a difficult period. "We have contacted all the employers to try to ensure that their meals and daily essentials have been taken care of. At the same time, we reached out to charity organiza-



SINGAPORE: Reverend Samuel Gift Stephen listens to the feedback from a migrant worker about the food that had been delivered to them during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Singapore on Wednesday. — Reuters

tions...to help supplement whatever there is shortfall," said Eugene Aw, director of RT Group, which manages several factory-converted migrant dormitories, including one vis-

ited by AGWO on Wednesday.

"Because the ramping-up period takes a bit of time for all these demands to be met on a daily basis." — Reuters

For SoftBank's Son, virus turns vision to illusion

BANGALORE/TOKYO: SoftBank Group Corp founder Masayoshi Son's dream of a global tech empire is unraveling, with the coronavirus crisis compounding losses at his \$100 billion Vision Fund and distress at his big bets portending more pain.

More than half of the fund's capital is in startups that are suffering from the virus impact or exhibiting stress pre-dating the outbreak, a Reuters analysis showed. Ride-hailing usage at flagship transport investments has fallen more than 50 percent and six SoftBank-backed startups have pushed IPO plans from this year to next. The Japanese conglomerate has already flagged a 1.8 trillion yen (\$17 billion) loss at the fund for the year to March - during which Son's "intuitive" bet WeWork spectacularly imploded - unsettling Middle Eastern backers which stumped up much of the fund's money.

Though many problems at portfolio firms pre-date the pandemic, the resulting economic meltdown has exposed what critics have long called an extraordinarily risky strategy of ploughing huge sums into unproven businesses in the expectation that would enable them to dominate big new markets.

"The Vision Fund has been a mess. It has been a case of an organisation with too much money just splashing it around without doing enough due diligence," said Joe Bauernfreund, chief executive of SoftBank shareholder Asset Value Investors.

Son transformed SoftBank into a tech investor over the past three years and raised the world's biggest late-stage investment fund in the Vision Fund. To be sure, some investments are doing better, but examples are scant as the pandemic magnifies problems. The pain is particularly keen in transport and real estate, which make up \$43 billion of investment and include car-share firm Getaround, home-seller OpenDoor and real estate brokerage Compass.

Restrictions on movement worldwide has hit the market for the portfolio's four major ride-hailing firms, with India's Ola suspending operations in cities in Britain, Australia and New Zealand, three people with knowledge of the matter said.

SoftBank and Ola declined to comment. US peer Uber Technologies Inc, whose stock is stuck 40 percent below its 2019 initial public offering (IPO) price, last month said it had sufficient cash reserves to weather the crisis. Southeast Asia's Grab said its food delivery business is doing well. China's Didi declined to comment. The fund does not include all \$13 billion invested with SoftBank itself in office-share startup WeWork, or SoftBank's bet on satellite operator OneWeb, which filed for bankruptcy protection last month.

Among SoftBank-backed startups, at



Masayoshi Son

least six that have pushed back IPO plans to 2021, including BigCommerce, which powers e-commerce sites for the likes of Toyota Motor Corp and Sony Corp, said the three people, who were not authorised to speak with media so declined to be identified.

Vision Fund bet DoorDash, a US food delivery startup which earlier this year confidentially filed to go public, is also re-evaluating IPO plans given capital market volatility, a fourth person said.

DoorDash declined to comment. BigCommerce did not respond to a request for comment. IPOs are a vital means of raising capital for the Vision Fund, with investors such as Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) and Abu Dhabi's Mubadala receiving dividends - an unusual arrangement for such a fund. PIF and Mubadala in recent weeks have expressed fresh concern about the fund's performance and its ability to pay dividends, said two people directly aware of the conversations. — Reuters

Malaysia calls for end to South China Sea standoff

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia called yesterday for disputes over the South China Sea to be resolved by peaceful means, amid a standoff between Chinese and Malaysian vessels that a US think tank said had been going on for months. US and Australian warships arrived in the South China Sea this week near an area where a Chinese government survey vessel, the Haiyang Dizhi 8, has been operating close to a drillship under contract to Malaysian state oil company Petronas, regional security sources have said.

The standoff was the latest development in a series of targeted harassments by Chinese vessels of drilling operations in five oil blocks off the Malaysian coast in the past year, said Greg Poling, director of the Washington-based Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI).

Since December, Chinese forces have been harassing supply ships servicing the West Capella, an oil exploration vessel operated by Petronas, Poling said. Last week, the Haiyang Dizhi 8, accompanied by a Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) vessel, entered Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and began a survey close to where the West Capella was operating. On Thursday, the Haiyang Dizhi 8 was still within Malaysia's EEZ, about 337 kilometers (209.4 miles) off Borneo, data from ship tracking website Marine Traffic Showed. Three US warships and an Australian frigate conducted a joint exercise in the South China Sea this week, near the site of the West Capella's operations, officials and security sources have said. — Reuters

Lifestyle

Friday Times

FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 2020

www.kuwaittimes.net

People get creative as a bush dressed with eyes and a mask is seen outside an apartment complex during the Coronavirus pandemic in Arlington, Virginia.—AFP

**Dreaming of returning home,
Egypt's Nubians revive language**

See Pages 20-21

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Dreaming of returning home, Egypt's Nubians revive language

Fatma Addar grew up in a Nubian family, connected to her ethnic minority's rich history through its tales of a bygone life on the Nile, though regaled less and less in their original language. She lives in the southern Egyptian city of Aswan and was schooled mostly in Arabic — her only occasional brushes with her mother tongue are when she hears it spoken by the family elders. “I usually get asked how can I be Nubian when I can't speak my own language,” the 23-year-old told AFP. “It was always a problem for me.” The language, she says, is “unpracticed by many in her generation”, born decades after the mass eviction of Egypt's Nubians from their ancestral lands to make way for the construction of the Aswan High Dam on the Nile in the 1960s.

Built under late president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the colossal project aimed to harness the Nile's annual floods and provide electricity for the burgeoning nation. But tens of thousands of Nubians were uprooted from their homes, according to rights and advocacy groups. Their villages were then inundated by Lake Nasser, the dam's massive reservoir, and today, only a handful of Nubian villages remain close to the Nile banks, attracting



A Nubian woman sells souvenirs in the village of Gharb Suhail near Aswan in Upper Egypt, some 920 kilometres south of the capital Cairo.—AFP photos



Nubian Egyptian women sell souvenirs in the village of Gharb Suhail.

tourists. Since then, the ethnic minority has complained of systematic discrimination and cultural marginalization — and dreamt of returning to its lands and reviving its traditions and language.

A need that faded

Indigenous to modern day southern Egypt and northern Sudan, Nubians trace their roots to an ancient African civilization that eventually ruled Egypt during the 25th dynasty, some 3,000 years ago. They built a life of lush verdant expanses, spacious domed mud-brick houses, clusters of palm trees, distinct customs tied to the Nile and spoke their very own language. But after their eviction, they were resettled in arid desert villages far from the Nile, forcing many to abandon agriculture and seek work in other cities across Egypt or abroad.

Traditions closely tied to life along the Nile have waned and younger generations have become less acquainted with their mother tongue that was never taught in local schools. Although there are no official figures for today's Nubian community, advocacy groups estimate its number to be three or four million, out of Egypt's 100-million population. It is also unclear how many speak Nubian, a language that is not understood by non-Nubian Egyptians. “Our integration into Arabic-speaking communities caused the need to speak Nubian to fade over time,” Addar said.

‘Cultural marginalisation’

In ancient times, Nubian was written using several different alphabets including Coptic, Greek and Meroitic, according to academic studies. But the written language was gradually abandoned and for centuries it was just passed down orally from one generation to the next. Among Nubians, it has lived on in Egypt as two spoken dialects, Kenzi and Fadji, and those who use one dialect do not necessarily understand the other. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the language was used as a military code after late president Anwar al-Sadat approved the idea put forward by a Nubian soldier.

But Nubians have sought to revive the written form of the language in recent decades. Efforts have culminated in deriving a 24-letter alphabet, whose closest resemblance is the Greek one, according to Hussein Kobbara, a Nubian studies researcher. “It is such a shame that this ancient language is not taught in schools or universities. It's clear cultural marginalisation that undermines our ethnic identity,” the 63-year-old said.

Tales from the past

Fluent speakers and academics have recently started holding language classes for the Nubian diaspora living in cities like Cairo and Alexandria. Others have applied 21st-century ways to boost the language, using online videos and mobile applications.

Lifestyle | Feature

One Nubian entrepreneur, Hafsa Amberkab, launched the initiative “Koma Waidi” — meaning tales from the past — documenting stories told by elders and collecting dying expressions. Helped by Addar, she has compiled since last year a dictionary of some 230 words in the Kenzi dialect, written using Arabic letters to facilitate pronunciation for readers. It has also been transcribed into English, Arabic and Spanish. “We derive the expressions, as we film old Nubians telling tales of their old villages and the customs they practiced,” Amberkab said. One video shows an elderly woman carrying out an old ritual of baptising a child in the Nile waters seven days after he was born. The woman calls on God to guard the child’s footsteps as she wipes his face with the Nile water and sprinkles sweets in the water.

‘Like returning without our souls’

In 2017, software developer Momen Taloosh created a mobile language learning application named “Nubi”. “I am not fluent, having lived in Alexandria all my life,” said Taloosh. “But I belong to Nubia and I want the language to live on.” The application integrates the 24-letter alphabet and includes popular Nubian proverbs and songs in both dialects translated into Arabic, drawing some 3,000 active users and 20,000 downloads.

The songs include those crooned at weddings as well as others reflecting a deep sense of longing for the Nubians’ return to their lands. “My son, as you leave for the old village, remember me when you get there... and do not forget to greet it for me,” are the haunting lyrics to one song. Nubians have long called for a return to their ancestral lands. In 2017, dozens set out on a singing march but the demonstration was swiftly crushed and at least 24 people were arrested. Even before the eviction in the 1960s, smaller displacements had occurred in 1902, 1912 and again in 1933, to pave the way for the Aswan reservoir.

Egypt’s 2014 constitution recognized for the first time the Nubians’ right to return to their lands, setting a time frame that ends in 2024. But so far the government has not taken any measures to deliver on its promise. Instead, earlier this year, it announced compensation packages for thousands of Nubians affected by the 1960s dam construction. It included providing social housing in other cities across Egypt, cash, or the option to benefit from the state’s future development plans. Those Nubians affected by the earlier reservoir developments have been offered ownership rights of the land where they currently live, or temporary rights to use and benefit from those lands if located along the Nile. Activists insist however that such offers are no replacement for a right to return. “This will always be the dream and we have to keep the language alive until we go back to our lands,” said Amberkab. “Otherwise it will be like returning without our souls.”—AFP



Nubian boys lead camels along an alley in the village of Gharb Suhail.



Nubian girls play outside their home in the village of Abu Simbel.



A Nubian woman sells souvenirs in the village of Gharb Suhail.



Hafsa Amberkab (right) and Fatma Addar (left), Nubian Egyptian women who compiled a handy dictionary of some 230 words in the Kenzi dialect, speak to an AFP journalist as they show off a Nubian lexical chart in the village of Gharb Suhail.

US cancels spelling bee finals for first time since WWII

The US National Spelling Bee finals have been canceled for the first time since World War II due to the coronavirus pandemic, the organizers said. The finals of the world’s premier contest tackling some of the English language’s most obscure words were due to be held late May at National Harbor, Maryland. Organizers had already suspended the finals hoping to reschedule but said Tuesday they had “determined there is no clear path to safely set a new date in 2020.” It is the first time

since World War II that the national finals have been canceled after they were first held in 1925.

“Our hearts go out to the spellers who won’t get their final shot at winning because of the pandemic and the difficult decisions it is prompting us to make,” Scripps National Spelling Bee executive director Paige Kimble said in a statement. “They are now part of a widely expanding group of children and adults who are missing out on opportunities due to the coronavirus.” The

spelling bee is the latest in a growing list of sporting and cultural events to be called off due to the growing coronavirus pandemic.

Last year’s finals ended in an unprecedented eight-way tie after hours of intense competition. The eight children each received a \$50,000 cash prize in addition to their own trophies. Millions of youngsters, typically aged nine through 15, compete annually in local and regional spelling bees hoping to make it to the finals.—AFP

Surfing's 'Indiana Jones'

stages unlikely photoshoot to save planet



Hawaiian "protest surfer" Alison Teal walks past a Horse Guard during a visit to London to raise awareness on the need to combat climate change.—AFP photos



Hawaiian "protest surfer" Alison Teal walks outside Buckingham Palace with her surfboard.

It's a scene that seems almost surreal today — adventure filmmaker Alison Teal paddle surfing along the River Thames in bubblegum-pink swimwear, fishing out plastic rubbish from the murky waters. The photos were taken just last month before anyone could have imagined that within weeks, half of humanity would find itself confined at home to stem the spread of the new coronavirus. But their message remains valid: protect our planet. Dubbed the "Female Indiana Jones" by Time magazine, Teal, who is in her 30s, has for years travelled the globe raising awareness about the environment and battling plastic pollution.

With a wide social media following, her aim is to "educate through entertainment" with spontaneous events in dramatic — if unlikely — spots, always in her signature pink, like her eco-friendly surfboard made from recycled coffee cups. She wants to convey the warning that the world's oceans are in trouble and hopes to inspire youngsters to act. A series of photos featuring Teal are set to be published Wednesday to mark Earth Day. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic that has swept across the globe, the project has taken on new meaning for the adventurous American.



Hawaiian "protest surfer" Alison Teal arrives with a stand up paddle made of used plastic bottles to collect trash on the River Thames near Kew Bridge.



Hawaiian "protest surfer" Alison Teal poses in a classic telephone booth with her surfboard.

Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, April 24, 2020

“Hopefully this is the time in history to recognize how interconnected we all are globally to improve our health for both humans and the planet,” she told AFP from confinement at her home in Hawaii. “It’s severely tragic the impact that the virus is having on people’s lives,” she said. But she added that she also saw “a ray of hope” with the impact the confinement was having on the environment. “It makes me hopeful that we have the capability to work on improving our planet’s waterways and air quality,” she said in emailed comments. Having surfed along the River Seine in Paris past the Eiffel Tower in 2018, Teal came to the British capital in early March to stage a series of shots.

The photos also show her night surfing and posing at London landmarks such as Buckingham Palace or following in the Beatles’ footsteps on Abbey Road. They add to an impressive portfolio the surfer has amassed in recent years. Teal has published short films on her blog and social media, showing her diving to retrieve plastic from the ocean or paddling through stretches of rubbish from the Maldives to Los Angeles.—AFP



Hawaiian “protest surfer” Alison Teal poses for tourists with her surfboard in front of Buckingham Palace.



Hawaiian “protest surfer” Alison Teal stands at the main gate of Buckingham Palace with her surfboard.



Hawaiian “protest surfer” Alison Teal paddles under Kew Bridge on the River Thames.



Hawaiian “protest surfer” Alison Teal paddles in the River Thames on her surfboard.

Herd of dugongs sighted off the Coast of Thai Island



This aerial view handout from Thailand’s National Marine Park Operation Center in Trang taken and released on April 22, 2020 shows dugongs swimming in Joohey cape at Libong Island in Trang province in southern Thailand.—AFP

Mesmerizing aerial images showed a herd of more than 30 dugongs drifting serenely off the coast of a Thai island on Wednesday. Thailand’s tourism industry has taken a battering since the outbreak of the coronavirus, putting millions out of jobs after the pandemic paralyzed global travel. But the slowdown in visitor foot traffic has brought a wildlife revival along shorelines and waterways, including reports this week of record

numbers of leatherback turtle nests on the country’s deserted beaches.

Drone images released by the National Marine Park Operation Center showed the dugongs sunning themselves beneath clear turquoise waters off the coast of southern Libong Island. The slow-moving sea creatures, closely related to the manatee, are classified as a vulnerable species. Thailand has not always been a safe haven for wildlife,

with plastic waste choking marine life and water pollution from boat traffic damaging habitats. Last year, an orphaned baby dugong was found stranded on a beach in southern Thailand, winning hearts nationwide as conservationists fought to keep it alive. It died months later from an infection worsened by bits of rubbish lining its stomach, reviving public debate on Thailand’s urgent need to tackle its plastic addiction.—AFP

Lifestyle | Features



A Palestinian craftsman fashions a traditional "fanous" lantern, a decoration used to celebrate the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan beginning later in the week, in a workshop in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip.—AFP

Ex-rapper, notorious IS suspect arrested in Spain

A former British rapper and notorious Islamic state suspect has been arrested in Spain, judicial sources said on Wednesday. Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary, a former rapper from west London who once posted an image of himself holding a severed head on Twitter, has been arrested in the southern coastal city of Almeria, the source said. Police had on Tuesday announced the arrest of "one of the most wanted foreign terrorist fighters of Daesh" — the Arabic acronym for Islamic State — identifying him as an Egyptian national but without giving his name or saying exactly when he was detained. Speaking to AFP, a Spanish judicial source confirmed it was Bary.

Police said the suspect "had recently entered Spain illegally and was found hiding in a rented flat" in Almeria where several other people were also arrested. "He is one of the most wanted terrorists in Europe on grounds of his criminal record within the ranks of Daesh and because he is extremely dangerous," a police statement said. Before arriving in Spain, Bary spent "several years in conflict zones in Syria and Iraq", police said, describing him as presenting "some very strange personality traits and an extremely violent criminal profile which had brought him to the attention of Europe's police and intelligence services". — AFP



Rapper notorious IS

'Bohemian Rhapsody' screenwriter to pen new Whitney Houston biopic

The Oscar-nominated screenwriter behind "Bohemian Rhapsody" and "The Two Popes" has been lined up to write and co-produce a new feature film on the life of Whitney Houston, US media reported Wednesday. Anthony McCarten will join forces with the Whitney Houston estate and Grammy-award winner Clive Davis, the man who signed the star to her first recording contract, according to Deadline. They are negotiating with Stella Meghie to direct the biopic "I Wanna Dance With Somebody", the website reported. Meghie retweeted the Deadline story.

McCarten, 58, has had a series of hits in recent years — all biopics. They include "The Dark Hours" (2017), "Bohemian Rhapsody" (2018), and "The Two Popes" (2019). Houston died in 2012 aged 48, drowning in her bathtub after ingesting a large amount of cocaine. Despite a career marked by drug addiction, she remains one of the great voices of R'n'B and popular music in the last

30 years. Two recent documentaries have lifted the veil on previously taboo aspects of the life of the woman who learned her scales in a gospel choir in Newark, New Jersey. "Whitney" provided testimony that Houston had been sexually assaulted in her youth by a much older cousin.

While "Whitney: Can I Be Me" referred to the singer's love affair with another woman, Robyn Crawford, which she hid for much of her adult life. "I know the full Whitney Houston story has not yet been told," Davis told Deadline, describing the screenplay as "no holds barred, musically rich". Director Meghie made a name for herself in 2016 with a critically acclaimed debut film, "Jean of the Joneses" (2016), a low-budget family comedy. Since then, she has directed three other feature films, including "The Photograph", released in February in the United States.—AFP

Griffin suffering from 'painful' symptoms associated with coronavirus

Kathy Griffin has been sent to a coronavirus "isolation ward" after suffering from "unbearably painful symptoms". The 59-year-old comedian has claimed she may be suffering from the respiratory illness - which is also known as COVID-19 - after she began displaying symptoms of the virus and had to be moved from an "urgent care facility" to a separate isolation ward in a "major hospital". Kathy also hit out at US president Donald Trump after he claimed America is now doing "more testing than any other nation", as she alleged she was unable to be tested for the virus despite her symptoms.

Quoting a tweet from Trump in which he made his claims, Kathy wrote: "He's lying. I was sent to the #COVID19 isolation ward room in a major hospital ER from a separate urgent care facility after showing UN-BEARABLY PAINFUL symptoms. The hospital couldn't test me for #coronavirus because of CDC (Pence task force) restrictions. #TESTTESTTEST (sic)" Kathy's symptoms come just one week after she revealed the tragic news that her mother Maggie Griffin - who would have been 100 in June - has died at the age of 99 following a battle with dementia.

The former 'Fashion Police' star said she had been left "shaking" by her parent's death and admitted she is "not doing well", as she hailed her mom as "irreplaceable" and "so unique". She wrote on social media: "My Mom, the one and only, Maggie Griffin, passed away today. Hours ago. I am gutted. She was my best friend. She was my family. —Bang Showbiz

Female-centric 'Star Wars' series in works

A new female-centric "Star Wars" television series is being developed for the Disney+ streaming platform, according to Hollywood trade reports Wednesday. The show from Leslye Headland, co-creator of Netflix drama "Russian Doll," would be Disney's latest bid to expand the blockbuster sci-fi franchise on the small screen after the runaway success of "The Mandalorian." Disney did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Deadline Hollywood said the series would be a "female-driven action thriller with martial arts elements and set in an alternate timeline from the usual 'Star Wars' universe." The Hollywood Reporter said the new show would be live-action. Disney has prioritized television for "Star Wars" over the next few years. "The Mandalorian," featuring the viral internet sensation Baby Yoda, was the flagship launch show for Disney's on-demand platform last year, proving a hit with critics and audiences. A third season is already in development.

In addition, two other new live-action "Star Wars" television series are in the works for Disney+, including the return of Ewan McGregor as Obi-Wan Kenobi, and a prequel to movie spin-off "Rogue One." In February, then-CEO Bob Iger hinted at potential spinoffs for "The Mandalorian," which could include "taking those characters in their own direction in terms of series." Meanwhile, Disney has slowed down the release of its upcoming "Star Wars" films, with its recently concluded trilogy seeing diminishing box office returns and mixed reviews.—AFP



An image of the world from space showing one of the green continents. — Shutterstock

25 surprising travel facts

that'll make you see the world in a whole new light

By Jack Palfrey

Travel: we sort of know all about it, right? Wrong. Scratch beneath the surface and it turns out we know nothing of this world. Do you know how long the world's shortest commercial flight lasts, for example? (clue: shorter than the time it takes to boil an egg.) How about which country has no rivers? Or what unconventional pizza topping is popular in Sweden?

Ready to see the world in a whole new light?

With international travel currently off the table, why not use this time to swat up on surprising travel trivia, offering a few precious minutes of sweet relief from the constant news cycle and providing some fun facts to fill awkward pauses during video calls with friends and family; trust us, nothing plugs a silence better than a stat about how many steps from the nearest trash bin you are in Disneyland at all times. Without further ado, here's 25 travel facts that are certain to shock and surprise.

A stationary blue train in India, with passengers sitting and leaning out of the doorway and looking through the train's windows.—Getty Images



Trains, planes and automobiles...

1. The world's longest commercial flight took around 30 hours.

The so-called 'Double Sunrise' service by Qantas, which ran from Australia to Sri Lanka from 1943-45, often lasted over 30 hours, with passengers seeing the sunrise twice. Today the longest commercial flight is the Singapore Airlines Singapore to New York route, with an average journey time of 17 hours and 50 minutes.

2. The shortest commercial flight takes less than two minutes.

Incredibly, the shortest commercial flight, operating between the neighboring islands of Westray and Papa Westray in Scotland's Orkney islands, takes around one and a half minutes. With the fastest recorded flight taking less than 50 seconds.

3. Japanese railways hand out 'certificates' for delays of more than five minutes.

Japanese trains, reputedly the most punctual in the world, issue passengers with a 'delay certificate' if a train is running more than five minutes behind schedule. The documents can be shown to bosses or teachers to explain a passenger's lateness. Delay certificates are also issued on some trains in Germany and in Paris.

4. The most expensive airport to city taxi ride costs around £190.

Any budget traveler worth their salt attempts to avoid airport taxis at all costs, but anyone keeping an eye on their finances should certainly avoid jumping in a cab from Tokyo's Narita Airport. According to a study by Moneycorp (a currency exchange company), the ride is the most expensive airport-to-city transfer in the world, costing an average of £191/\$235 one way.

5. India's trains transport roughly 23 million passengers each day.

That's the entire population of Australia. Additionally, if laid out in a single line, the tracks from India's railway network could circle the world one and a half times.

Things you didn't know about countries...

6. Saudi Arabia has no rivers.

The country in the Arabian peninsula has no permanent rivers. It is one of the 17 countries in the world without a single river flowing through it.

7. In Ethiopia the current year is 2013.

Ethiopia maintains its own calendar, which, due to a difference in the perceived date of the Annunciation (the proclamation of the birth of Christ), is seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar.



The Eiffel Tower as viewed from across the Seine and framed neatly by two leafy trees in autumn colors.—Shutterstock

dar (which is used as standard across most of the world). In Ethiopia the new year also begins on either August 29 or August 30.

8. It is the same time at both ends of China.

Despite spanning five geographical time zones, China only has one set time, which is observed throughout the country. China Standard Time is UTC+8.

9. The UK has the world's longest country name.

The UK's official title of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland makes it the longest recognized country name in the world.

10. Alaska is both the westernmost and easternmost state in the USA.

Alaska's Aleutian Islands are actually located west of the 180th Meridian (the line that divides the eastern and western hemisphere), making it the only US state to be partly located in the eastern hemisphere.

Foodie facts...

11. The most ordered meal on Deliveroo, a leading takeout app, in 2019 was a Hawaiian dish of raw fish.

Of all the restaurants served by the app, which operates in over 200 cities around the world, the most ordered meal was the Poké Signature Super Protéiné – a Hawaiian dish with raw fish as the core ingredient – from restaurant Pokawa in the city of Paris. Less exotic, a humble cheeseburger from the London branch of chain restaurant Five Guys was the second most ordered dish on the app.



A large seafood pizza displayed on a wooden board. The tomato and cheese pizza is topped with squid, muscles and other shellfish.—Shutterstock



There's something unusual about the litter bins at Disneyland.

12. Russia only classified beer as an alcoholic drink in 2011

Remarkably before then any drink with less than 10% alcohol was considered a 'foodstuff'.

13. Pilots and co-pilots do not eat the same meal before a flight.

As part of standard convention, pilots and co-pilots do not eat the same food before a flight in case of food poisoning (or worse). If one of the pilots is incapacitated (unable to leave the bathroom) then the other pilot can take over.

14. Banana is a popular pizza topping in Sweden.

Often paired with curry powder believe it or not.

15. Instant noodles topped a Japanese poll of the country's greatest inventions of the 20th century.

In the poll, conducted in the year 2000 by Fuji Research Institute, respondents placed instant noodles at the top of the list, followed by karaoke in second place. Incidentally karaoke translates



The Poké Signature Super Protéiné – a Hawaiian dish with raw fish.

from Japanese into English as 'empty orchestra'.

Lesser-known aspects of famous landmarks...

16. Despite what people say, the Great Wall of China is not visible from space.

Even from low Earth orbit the structure requires magnification to be seen by the human eye.

17. The Eiffel Tower was initially greatly disliked by the Parisian art community upon opening.

The iconic tower was labelled as 'monstrous' and 'ridiculous' after it was unveiled to the world. It's even claimed that contemporary writer Guy de



An aerial view of Niagara Falls, a group of three waterfalls at the southern end of Niagara Gorge.—Shutterstock



The Great Wall of China

Maupassant disliked the structure so much that he ate lunch in the tower every day because it was the only place in Paris where the landmark was not visible.

18. The scenic Great Ocean Road, that sweeps along the coast of Victoria, Australia, is actually a war memorial.

Built by soldiers and dedicated to those who lost their lives in WWI, the road serves as the largest war memorial in the world.



The island of Yap, a state of Micronesia, rocks are used as currency.

19. Sudan has more ancient pyramids than Egypt.

Sources vary, but Sudan is claimed to be home to around 250 pyramid structures, that were built by the rulers of the ancient Kushite kingdoms between 2500BC to 300AD. Egypt is thought to have just over 100 pyramids.

20. The minarets of the Taj Mahal lean outwards slightly.

This was done deliberately to ensure that if the structure collapsed the minarets would fall away from the central tomb, and not destroy it. It's also true that a team of 20,000 artisans and craftsmen built the iconic structure, but the popular story about them all being amputated by Shah Jahan, the ruler who commissioned it, upon completion (so they'd never build anything as beautiful), is

most likely a myth.

An actress dressed as Mary Poppins smiles at a young child as she leads a line of children in song and dance in front of Cinderella's castle during Disney's 60th Diamond Celebration at Disneyland California.

Everything else...

21. There are currently 320,000 people learning 'Klingon' (the fictional language featured in television show Star Trek) on language app Duolingo.

English is the most popular language on the app, with 34 million people undertaking lessons since the beginning of 2020.

22. On the island of Yap, a state of Micronesia, rocks are used as currency.

Each rock's worth is based on its size and its history (where it came from). Though US dollars have now started to be used for everyday purchases on the island, rocks are still used for ceremonial transactions (during weddings, for example). Yap also uses turmeric, shells and cloth as official currency.

23. If it was as densely populated as New York City, the entire world's population could fit into the US state of Texas.

We wouldn't have all that much room, but, with the rest of the planet uninhabited, there'd be plenty of places to go to escape the crowds.

24. You're never more than 30 steps away from a trash can in Disneyland.

The story goes that Walt Disney used to observe visitors in the park and see how many steps they took before littering, as a result a litter bin is never more than 30 steps away in any Disney park. Another of Walt's lesser-known Disneyland additions was the creation of a secret bar hidden inside the – then otherwise 'dry' – park, which he used to entertain personal guests and sponsors. The speakeasy-style venue, located behind a large door in the New Orleans Square section of the park, now runs as a private members club with an annual membership fee of \$10,000.



Japanese railways

25. You don't need to wait an hour after eating before you can swim safely.

Despite what your mother always told you, there is no medical data that suggests you can't swim on a full stomach. It can, however, feel uncomfortable, and potentially lead to a feeling of nausea, so it's best to take a short pause after polishing off your sandwich before you go crashing into the surf.— www.lonelyplanet.com



Pyramids in Sudan

Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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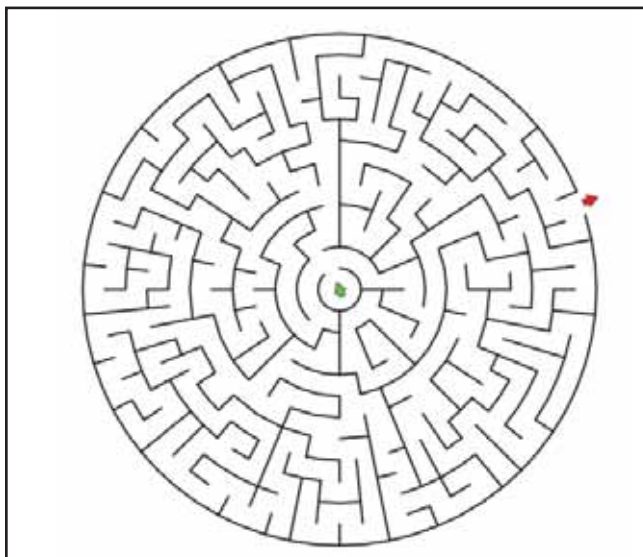
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Yesterday's Solution

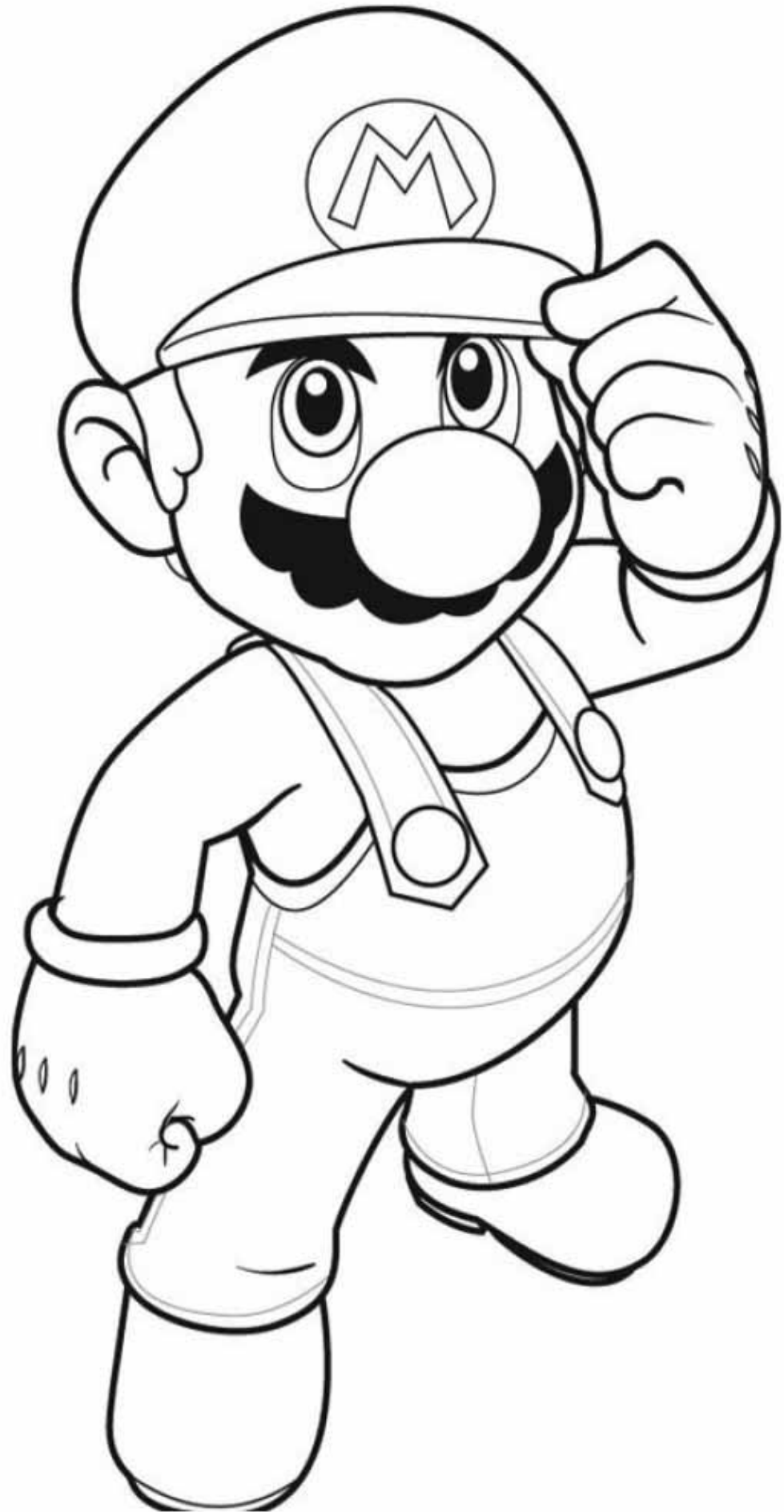
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very hard

Kids Mazes



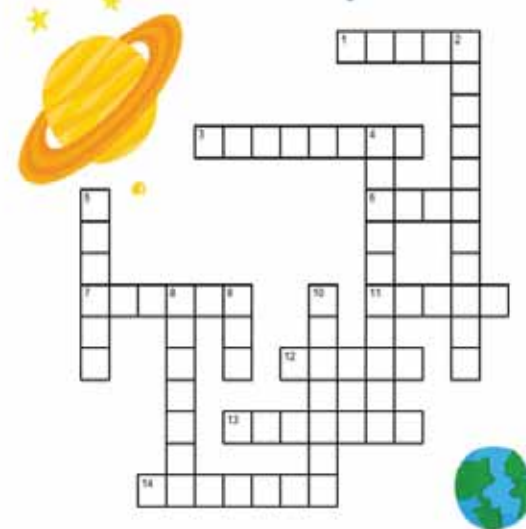
Color It



Join the dots



Our Solar System



ACROSS

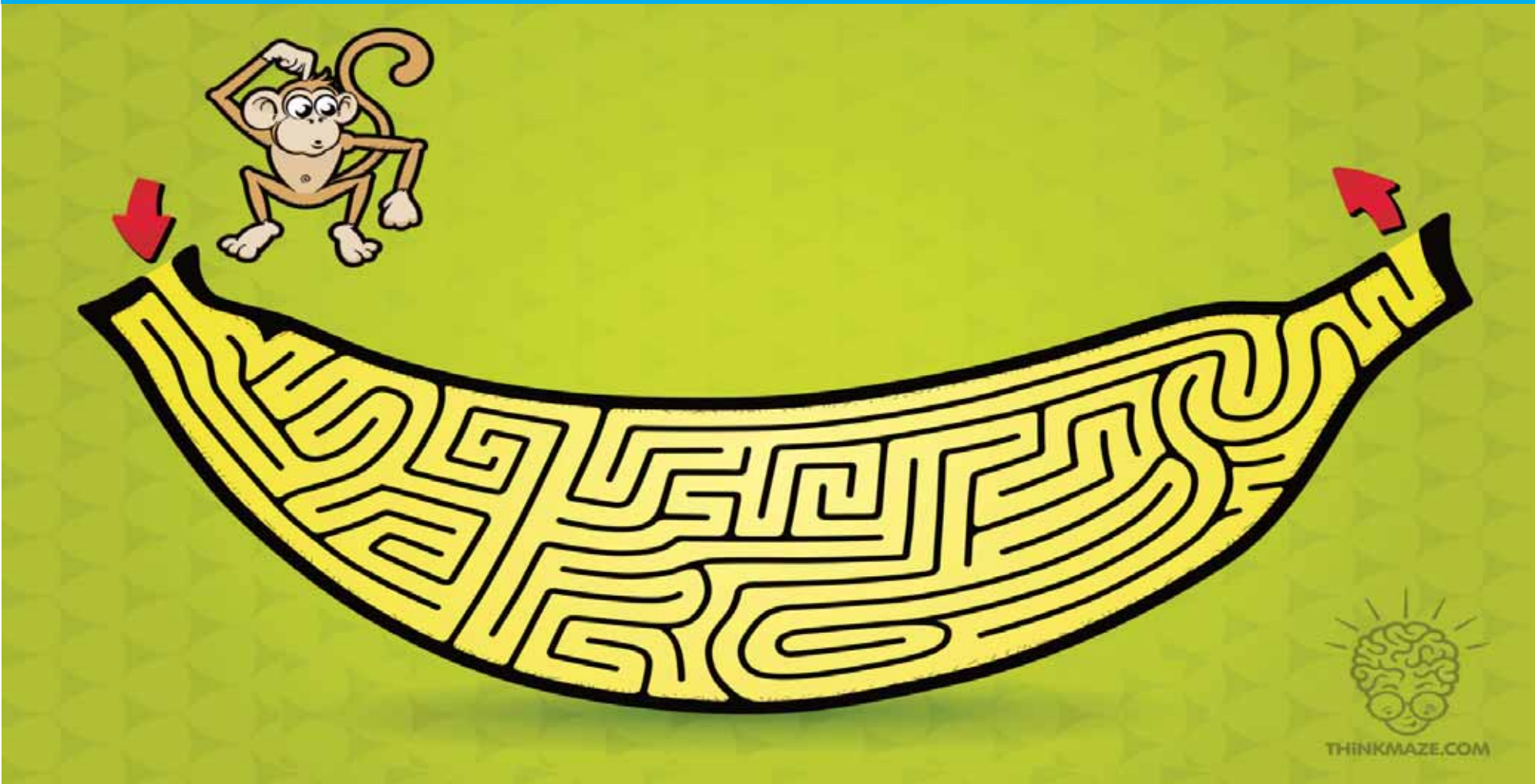
- 1. Planet named after the Roman goddess of love and beauty
- 3. Our solar system is part of this galaxy
- 6. Nicknamed "the red planet"
- 7. Third largest planet in our solar system
- 11. Now called a dwarf planet
- 12. Covers 70 percent of the Earth's surface
- 13. Largest planet in our solar system
- 14. Planet closest to the sun

DOWN

- 2. A star and the planets orbiting it
- 4. Layer of gas that surrounds a planet
- 5. Planet named after the roman god of agriculture
- 8. Planet furthest from the sun
- 9. Closest star to Earth
- 10. Force that keeps a planet moving in orbit

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Kuwait Times

248 33 199

Friday, April 24, 2020

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Stars

STAR TRACK

**Aries (March 21-April 19)**

It's time to refill the well of your soul, Aries. You spend so much of your life in service to others that it's only natural that you feel drained sometimes. Rather than try to push past this feeling and go on as though nothing is the matter, consider it a sign that something is amiss. Admit if you're feeling unappreciated. You've spent too much time putting the happiness of others before your own. It's time to change your priorities.

**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

Difficult as it may be for you to face all those projects you've left undone, Taurus, know that you'll be free to move on once they're complete. People from your past figure prominently now. Perhaps they come forward to repay an old debt or possibly claim repayment from you. Don't abandon your dreams. Once you've cleared a path for them, they're more likely to come true.

**Gemini (May 21-June 20)**

Just because one person is no longer a part of your life doesn't mean that all people are unreliable. People change, as do situations. It's possible that this person was no longer a healthy influence on you, in which case the departure is for the best. You're going to have to become more adaptable, Gemini, because there are more changes on the horizon, especially where your career is concerned.

**Cancer (June 21-July 22)**

It can be hard to release old habits and beliefs even as new, better ways of thinking struggle to gain a foothold. It's time for you to do this, Cancer. You might find it difficult to confide your feelings to another, but a frank conversation with close friends will do much to ease your mind. There's no question that you're changing. Your friends will show you that this transformation is positive.

**Leo (July 23-August 22)**

You always suspected that your job was making you crazy, but it never occurred to you that it could make you sick, too. Is it really worth it, Leo? You may be asking yourself this question today. Fortunately, your talents apply to several professions. Why not take a closer look at other fields? One way or another, it's clear that change is coming. You might as well be the one who directs it.

**Virgo (August 23-September 22)**

Just how long has it been since you indulged in a big helping of your favorite guilty pleasure, Virgo? It's time to let the youngster in you come out and play today. Eat that chocolate, read those mindless magazines, or skip down the sidewalk. You've been taking life much too seriously lately. Even grownups are entitled to indulge in the pleasures of youth from time to time.

**Libra (September 23-October 22)**

If you feel like you're trying to push a square peg into a round hole, you're probably right, Libra. Whether you're having personal or professional difficulties, there are times when it just doesn't pay to try so hard. In fact, it's often a sign that there is something fundamentally wrong with the relationship. Try to take more of a philosophical attitude, Libra. If it's meant to work, it will.

**Scorpio (October 23-November 21)**

Things aren't always as they first appear. People you thought you knew well and circumstances that you thought you understood thoroughly now seem anything but straightforward. Has the world really changed that much or has your perception altered somehow? It's time to direct this "altered" vision inward. You're ready for a change, Scorpio. Perhaps it's time to dust off that resume.

**Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)**

Difficult as it may be for you to face all those projects you've left undone, Sagittarius, know that you'll be free to move on once they're complete. People from your past figure prominently now. Perhaps they come forward to repay an old debt or possibly claim repayment from you. Don't abandon your dreams. Once you've cleared a path for them, they're more likely to come true.

**Capricorn (December 22-January 19)**

You could have a "eureka!" moment today, Capricorn, as events from your past unexpectedly bubble to the surface of your mind and crystallize in a surprising new way. Suddenly, you have a clear understanding of how these past events affect your present behavior. You can use this new knowledge to bring about change. There is clearly a situation at work or at home that is in need of transformation.

**Aquarius (January 20- February 18)**

Sometimes it's easier to tend to life's mundane details rather than lift your eyes and see the big picture, Aquarius. For example, it's likely that you've grown complacent at work. Could it be that you aren't at the right job or in the right career after all? Bussing yourself with trivia isn't the way to avoid answering the question. It's imperative that you face it head on and make the necessary changes.

**Pisces (February 19-March 20)**

Change is in the air, Pisces. Whether it's a dramatic change of faith or a major shift in your life's goals, prepare yourself for a profound transformation. It's likely due to the fact that you now have more freedom to do what you want, when you want. Perhaps a financial windfall has made this possible. Take care to choose your new path wisely. It doesn't offer you the choice of returning to your old lifestyle.

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
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Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
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Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
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Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
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Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina	00226	Mali	00223
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Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
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Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
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Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
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Business

FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 2020

34 Record US jobless claims wipe out post-Great Recession gains



35 Boeing to lay off 10% of workers in civil aviation



36 2020 Refinitiv Lipper Fund awards honor funds managed by Kamco Invest



In this file photo taken on April 21, 2020, an employee of a gas station in Arlington, Virginia, adjusts gasoline pump prices as they continue to fall. Beaten-down US oil prices rallied on Wednesday, following dramatic declines earlier this week even as American crude inventories near capacity levels. — AFP

Oil rallies as Gulf tensions eclipse virus woes

Crisis-hit oil market in frantic hunt for storage

SINGAPORE: Oil prices soared yesterday as escalating tensions between the US and Iran in the crude-rich Gulf lent support to markets battered by a coronavirus-triggered demand shock and concerns about storage. Brent crude, the international benchmark, rose 11.8 percent to \$22.79 a barrel in Asian afternoon trade. US benchmark West Texas Intermediate jumped 14.37 percent to \$15.76 a barrel, extending big gains from a day earlier.

Still, prices remain at multi-year lows as lockdowns and travel restrictions to fight the virus batter demand and storage facilities are overwhelmed by excess supply. Markets have had a rollercoaster ride this week, with US crude falling into negative territory for the first time as traders sought to offload oil but could not find buyers as storage facilities are reaching capacity.

Phillip Futures cited “heightened risk in the Middle East” for the current rally, which began in the New York session Wednesday after the US issued new threats amid rising naval tensions in the Gulf. US President Donald Trump took to Twitter to say he had “instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea”.

Iran meanwhile said it put its first military satellite into orbit, making it an emerging “world power”. Washington alleges that the space program is a cover to develop ballistic missiles.

The Gulf is a major gateway for oil to reach international markets, and previous spikes in tensions between US and Iranian vessels have seen crude prices similarly surge higher.

The rising tensions overshadowed a weekly

US inventory report that showed another big jump in crude stockpiles, including at the Cushing, Oklahoma hub where analysts say there is little remaining space as the virus saps demand. Phillip Futures however said that oil market watchers were divided as to the “motive of the president’s statement as it is released at a time of the historic crash in West Texas Intermediate and Brent crude.

Storage conundrum

The oil market, rocked by crisis this week as prices plunged below zero on rampant oversupply and demand-destroying coronavirus, faces the critical problem of where to store surplus crude. “To put it simply, there is too much oil with too little space to store it,” said TS Lombard economist Konstantinos Venetis. — AFP

Kuwait to review feasibility of AUB takeover

DUBAI: Kuwait’s finance minister has asked its sovereign wealth fund to review the feasibility of the takeover of Bahrain’s Ahli United Bank by its subsidiary Kuwait Finance House, state news agency KUNA reported on Wednesday. The decision came due to the fallout of the coronavirus outbreak and a global recession predicated by experts, KUNA said. Kuwait Finance House said earlier this month that it was postponing its acquisition of Ahli United Bank until December due to the outbreak. — KUNA

Business

Record US jobless claims wipe out post-Great Recession gains

Estimates for last week's claims as high as 5.5 million

WASHINGTON: A record 26 million Americans likely sought unemployment benefits over the last five weeks, confirming that all the jobs created during the longest employment boom in US history were wiped out in about a month as the novel coronavirus savages the economy.

Yesterday's weekly jobless claims report from the Labor Department add to a growing pile of increasingly bleak economic data. It will come amid rising protests against nationwide lockdowns to control the spread of COVID-19, the potentially lethal respiratory illness caused by the virus.

President Donald Trump, who is seeking a second term in the White House in November's general election, has been anxious to restart the paralyzed economy. Trump on Wednesday applauded steps taken by a handful of Republican-led states to begin reopening their economies, despite warnings from health experts of a potential new surge in infections. "The U.S. economy is hemorrhaging jobs at a pace and scale never before recorded," said Scott Anderson, chief economist at Bank of the West in San Francisco. "It compares to a natural disaster on a national scale."

Initial claims for state unemployment benefits probably totaled 4.2 million in the week ended April 18, according to a Reuters survey of economists. Still a figure that would have been seen as unimaginably high less than two months ago, it would be lower than the previous week's 5.245

million. Estimates in the survey for Thursday's data were as high as 5.50 million.

Based on the median forecast, last week's claims data would bring the cumulative unemployment benefits claims to roughly 26.2 million since the week ending March 21, representing about 16% of the labor force. The economy created 22 million jobs during the employment boom which started in September 2010 and abruptly ended in February this year.

Last week's claims report covered the period during which the government surveyed business establishments for the nonfarm payrolls component of April's employment report. Economists are forecasting as many as 25 million jobs were lost in April after the economy purged 701,000 positions in March, which was the largest decline in 11 years. "It wipes out all the job gains during the long expansion," said Joseph Brusuelas, chief economist at RSM in New York. "Once the economy begins to reopen initial claims will slow, but we have to be honest, not everyone is going to get their jobs back."

Worst behind?

The labor market slaughter adds to collapsing oil prices, retail sales, manufacturing production, homebuilding and home sales in reinforcing economists' contention that the economy entered recession in March. The National Bureau of Economic Research, the private research institute regarded as the arbiter of US recessions,



WASHINGTON: The economy created 22 million jobs during the employment boom which started in September 2010 and abruptly ended in February this year. — File photo

does not define a recession as two consecutive quarters of decline in real GDP, as is the rule of thumb in many countries. Instead, it looks for a drop in activity, spread across the economy and lasting more than a few months.

Though weekly jobless filings remain very high, last week's data would mark the third straight weekly decline, raising hopes that the

worst may be over. Weekly claims appeared to have peaked at a record 6.867 million in the week ended March 28. "Claims that have been backlogged due to capacity issues should continue to be processed, with initial claims dropping to more normal, but still elevated levels," said Andrew Hollenhorst, an economist at Citigroup in New York. — Reuters

JAL cuts profit forecast 40% as virus bites

TOKYO: Japan Airlines on Wednesday slashed its forecast for annual net profits by 43 percent because of the coronavirus, making it the latest carrier to fly into virus-related turbulence as global tourism plummets. With COVID-19 hammering both domestic and international routes, JAL said net profit for the fiscal year ending in March would be 53 billion yen (\$500 million), against an earlier forecast of 93 billion yen. JAL said demand had plunged owing to entry bans around the world, the cancellation of major domestic events and a state of emergency in Japan with authorities requesting citizens refrain from travel.

"We cancelled and reduced flights and we also used smaller planes, but these efforts didn't make up for the losses," the firm said in a statement. JAL also sharply revised down its operating profit forecasts to 100 billion yen from 140 billion yen while sales were forecast to fall to 1.41 trillion yen from a previous estimate of 1.48 trillion yen. JAL posted 150 billion yen in net profits in its previous fiscal year.

The firm's downward revision came a day after cash-strapped Virgin Australia filed for insolvency because of the coronavirus pandemic, which has ravaged the global airline industry. — AFP

Pricing the benefits of cheap oil in a world of lockdowns

NEW YORK: The oil price collapse that took US crude prices sub-zero for the first time in history may turn out to be a silver lining for the world economy, possibly offering a springboard for recovery when coronavirus lockdowns finally end. Cheap oil lowers transport and manufacturing costs while putting money into consumers' pockets for discretionary spending—essentially loosening financial conditions. Yet it can also be destructive, hitting stock markets and oil producers' budgets while fanning deflation risk. So which one is it this time?

Oil's fall, alongside stimulus from the US Federal Reserve and other central banks, has sharply eased financial conditions, according to a liquidity index compiled by consultancy CrossBorder Capital.

CrossBorder Capital's managing director Michael Howell estimates the Fed stimulus added 10 points to the index last month. But oil's impact has been greater—every 10 percent drop in futures boosts the index 3–4 points, meaning this year's 60 percent–70 percent fall equates to twice what the Fed did in March, Howell says. But given the moves are driven by an unprecedented demand collapse, expected this year at almost 30 million barrels per day (bpd), can markets and the economy benefit?

Yes and no

On the negative side, the oil moves will have tightened financial

conditions via equity falls, higher corporate bond yield and declining energy sector capital expenditures. And gasoline might be cheap but it will not induce anyone to take a long trip just yet. But that tightening effect has been partly mitigated by monetary and fiscal stimulus. And the uptick in Howell's index is a good omen for the economy — he says it usually front-runs purchasing managers indexes (PMIs) by three to six months.

"What it's telling us is that there's likely to be some kind of V-shaped rebound in the economy when coronavirus lockdowns end," Howell added. Another set of liquidity indicators tracked by Steve Donze at Pictet Asset Management look at oil through the prism of "excess liquidity"—essentially when falling production prices free up resources for financial asset investing.

Current 14 percent–16 percent excess liquidity—up from around 7 percent at the end of 2019 — implies a 50 percent equity price/earnings re-rating in six months, Donze said.

"The time lag makes all the difference here — remember the time lag between peak policy response in December 2008 and market bottom in March 2009," he added, referring to the 2008–2009 crisis. Equity and credit markets reacted relatively calmly to this week's oil rout; possibly prices already reflected massive year-to-date falls while corporate debt, including some junk bonds, is being backstopped by the Fed.

All that will not apply to swathes of oil producers such as Saudi Arabia and Russia which will be forced to raid rainy-day savings to keep economies afloat. But on the flip side are developing countries such as Turkey and India which will enjoy lower import bills and easing inflation pressures. But one thing that has changed since previous oil collapse episodes is the United States' emergence as a large net crude exporter, with oil and gas drilling comprising 0.5 percent of annual GDP and 4 percent of business investment, according to Morgan Stanley. — Reuters

Business

Boeing to lay off 10% of workers in civil aviation

Layoffs to hit unit manufacturing the troubled 737 MAX

NEW YORK: Boeing plans to reduce the workforce in its civil aviation unit by 10 percent to cut costs as the coronavirus causes a crisis for airlines, two sources familiar with the matter told AFP.

The layoffs would impact the unit manufacturing the troubled 737 MAX, which has been grounded for more than a year after two deadly crashes, as well as the 787 and 777 long-haul aircraft, the sources said. The job cuts could affect up to 7,000 workers. Boeing employs more than 160,000 people worldwide, including 70,000 in Washington state, where most of its civilian aircraft are assembled. The plant in South Carolina produces only part of the 787.

The news comes just a day after the company slowly resumed production at its Puget Sound facility in Washington, with new measures to keep workers six-feet apart along with health checks and hand-washing stations. Chief Executive David Calhoun wants to resolve the downsizing plan before Boeing embarks on complex and sensitive negotiations with the US Treasury to win in federal support for the industrial giant, the sources said. Boeing has sought \$60 billion in public aid for the US aerospace industry in light of the heavy hit

to the aviation business from the coronavirus crisis. Around \$17 billion aimed at Boeing was included in the giant federal relief bill approved in late March.

But the government aid is conditional on companies agreeing not to lay off workers once they have received taxpayer dollars.

'Voluntary layoffs'

A spokesman for the Boeing said the company is offering "voluntary layoff" programs, but did not confirm the size of the planned reductions. Workers who take Boeing's voluntary layoff offer would receive a pay and benefits package as part of the program that "aims to help reduce the size of our workforce through voluntary actions and, importantly, minimize future workforce actions," the spokesman said.

The company, already under strain amid the controversy surrounding the top-selling 737 MAX and uncertainties over when the plane will return to the skies, has suffered a wave of order cancellations from airlines struggling to survive as air travel has ground to a halt amid the pandemic shutdowns.

Aircraft leasing company Avalon canceled an order for 75 of the 737 MAX planes, and

Company offers voluntary layoff programs



RENTON, WA: Workers meet on the flight line near Boeing 737 MAX factory, shortly after the company resumed operations in Renton, Washington. —AFP

the China Development Bank scrapped a request for 29 of the aircraft. There also is uncertainty about an order from Norwegian Air for 92 MAX planes and five 787 planes after four subsidiaries filed for bankruptcy.

The spokesman said "there is no doubt the

aviation industry will look very different as we eventually recover from this pandemic." Boeing also may replace the executive in charge of the MAX program in announcements that could come when the company releases quarterly results April 29, the sources said. —AFP

Virus topples German consumer confidence

FRANKFURT: Confidence among consumers in Germany will start May at an all-time low, according to a monthly barometer published yesterday, as the coronavirus pandemic leaves its mark on Europe's top economy. The forward-looking monthly index from pollsters GfK plunged almost 26 points to -23.4, based on a survey of around 2,000 people in the first two weeks of April.

"At this point, consumers were feeling the full extent of measures to control the virus's spread for the first time, such as school and business closures, halts to production and restrictions on going outside," GfK said in a statement. Looking to individual components of the index, people's expectations for the

wider economy fell to their lowest level since the financial crisis in 2009.

Respondent's outlook for their personal income and readiness to make purchases also plunged.

"Uncertainty is huge among consumers at the moment," GfK commented.

"Along with blows to income that have already happened, fear of job loss has grown sharply among many workers," creating "a significant barrier to consumption".

But since early April, Berlin has agreed with Germany's 16 federal states on the first steps in a slow exit from lockdown, including opening smaller shops and allowing some students to return to school next week. Health minister Jens Spahn last week highlighted that each infected person now passes the virus on to fewer than one other person.

Such signs of hope prompted an unexpected resurgence of investor confidence back into positive territory in April, a monthly survey published on Tuesday showed. —AFP

Impoverished Haiti factories back to work

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti: After a month-long shutdown because of the coronavirus, Ghislaine is back behind her sewing machine at a Haitian textile factory, grateful for the \$4.90 daily wage.

President Jovenel Moise on March 19 ordered the immediate closure of all factories, schools, training centers and universities after the first two confirmed cases of new coronavirus in the poorest nation of the Americas. The decision put the textile sector's nearly 60,000 workers out of a job, and was taken without consultation with the country's private sector or labor organizations.

Work has now resumed with many precautions, starting with an obligatory scan from a laser thermometer. Anyone with a temperature higher than normal is refused entry into the factory where Ghislaine works in a Port-au-Prince industrial park.

MBI, the factory's South Korean operator, also requires workers to wash their hands and put on a mask before sitting down to stitch more

such face coverings. They are a product in addition to the factory's normal output of medical uniforms, but still won't be enough to secure the operation's future during a global economic collapse caused by the pandemic. Coronavirus has only worsened the challenges for Haiti, a Caribbean nation still struggling with the aftermath of a 2010 earthquake which killed more than 200,000 people and largely demolished the capital, Port-au-Prince. It is mired in corruption and was roiled last year by protests against Moise's government. In a country with no unemployment insurance, the government said it would pay the furloughed workers half their salary.

An uncertain future

But Ghislaine believes she only received one-quarter, and for that reason declines to give her last name. "We stayed at home as the president asked, and we got by thanks to the little savings we had," she said. "The assistance we received does not at all cover our expenses for the lost month."

Even at full wages, high inflation and the rapid devaluation of the national currency have eaten away at their spending power. Still, in an economy dominated by the informal, under-the-table sector, the daily wage of 500 gourdes (nearly five dollars) for eight hours' work is very attractive. —AFP

Business

2020 Refinitiv Lipper Fund awards honor three funds managed by Kamco Invest

Funds recognized for outstanding performance based on rigorous assessment process

KUWAIT: Kamco Invest, a regional non-banking financial powerhouse with one of the largest AUMs in the region, announced that three of its managed funds were recognized by the 2020 Refinitiv Lipper Fund awards for their consistent risk-adjusted performance relative to its peers. The awards were granted to the funds based on Lipper's quantitative and proprietary methodology, reflecting a truly independent and uncompromised assessment of fund performance.

The MENA market awards were announced on April 8th, 2020, recognizing funds with outstanding performance based on Refinitiv's rigorous assessment process. Kamco Premier Market Index Fund was named "Best Equity Fund in Kuwait over 3 Years", Kamco Investment Fund named "Best Equity Fund in Kuwait over 5 Years" and Kamco Al-Mamoun Fund "Best Equity Fund in Kuwait over 10 Years".

Commenting on the awards, Salah Al-Wuhaib, Senior Executive Director of Equity and Fixed Income at Kamco Invest, said, "We are proud to have received these recognitions that highlight the consistent performance of our funds based on

our diligent investment philosophy. These results were achieved by consistently placing our clients' interests at the forefront of our management style and continuously seeking to offer innovative and premium quality products and services."

He added, "The three funds outperformed their respective benchmarks during the mentioned periods with Kamco Premier Market Index Fund achieving 74.2 percent over the 3-year period (Benchmark 69.2 percent), Kamco Investment Fund achieving 52.9 percent over 5-years (Benchmark 33.6 percent), and Kamco Al-Mamoun Fund achieving 100.4 percent over 10-years (benchmark 5.8 percent)."

"The Refinitiv Lipper Fund Awards celebrate exceptional investment management. In a year of dramatic change across the global economy, climate, the environment and political cultures, it has

never been more important to have your investments entrusted with talented and experienced professionals. The Refinitiv Lipper Fund Awards recognize those exceptional managers and fund management groups who navigate these changes and steer your savings into outperforming returns", said Robert Jenkins, Head of Research, Lipper, Refinitiv.

Jenkins added, "We at Refinitiv congratulate the 2020 Refinitiv Lipper Fund Award winners for delivering outstanding performance to their investors and wish Kamco Invest continued success."

Al-Wuhaib concluded by congratulating the Asset Management Team, whose efforts and hard work paid off with the positive performance achieved by most of Kamco Invest's funds in outperforming their benchmarks. It is worth mentioning that Refinitiv is one of the world's largest providers of financial markets data



MENA market awards held on April 8



Salah Al-Wuhaib

and infrastructure, serving over 40,000 institutions in approximately 190 countries. It provides leading data and insights, trading platforms and open data and technology platforms that connect a thriving global financial markets community - driving performance in trading, investment, wealth management, regulatory compliance, market data management, enterprise risk and fighting financial crime.

Huawei announces business results for Q1 2020

SHENZHEN, China: Huawei announced its business results for the first quarter of 2020. In Q1 of this year, Huawei generated \$25.7 billion in revenue approximately, an increase of 1.4 percent year-on-year. The company's net profit margin in Q1 2020 was 7.3 percent. As COVID-19 continues to spread around the world, Huawei is taking proactive measures to ensure the safety of its employees. The company and its supplier network are working together to address the tough challenges facing production and resume operations. Huawei's business is continuing as usual and its overall business results in Q1 2020 are in line with expectations.

Networks are a lifeline for people from all walks of life during this public health crisis, so ensuring normal network operations is of paramount importance. Huawei is doing everything in its capabilities to help carriers ensure stable and secure network operations. Together, we are working to meet the network demand created by social distancing as people switch to telecommuting, distance education, and e-commerce for daily necessities.

Since the outbreak, Huawei and its partners have rapidly launched many 5G- and AI-powered medical applications. We are using our expertise in communications technologies to help fight the pandemic and save more lives. The AI-assisted coronavirus diagnosis solution cuts CT scan review times from 12 minutes down to 2, helping doctors improve their diagnostic efficiency. 5G-enabled remote video consultation helps mitigate shortages of frontline experts and increases the efficiency of diagnosis and treatment of critical patients. AI-powered thermal imaging devices can take temperatures, increasing the efficiency of infection prevention and control in public places. In addition, Huawei has been doing its best to get masks, test kits, and other protective supplies to the countries and organizations that need them.

A seed that survives the storm will sprout and then blossom. Even though it is impossible to know when the tides of this pandemic will turn, we at Huawei believe that this challenge will be overcome by standing together.

South Korean economy shrinks 1.4%



SEOUL: A couple wearing face masks walk through Seoul Plaza in front of the city hall in Seoul yesterday. South Korea's economy saw its worst performance in more than a decade in the first quarter as the coronavirus epidemic raged across the country, the central bank said yesterday. —AFP

SEOUL: South Korea's economy saw its worst performance in more than a decade in the first quarter as the coronavirus epidemic raged across the country, the central bank said yesterday, with officials warning of a bigger impact still to come. The world's 12th-largest economy endured one of the worst early outbreaks of the disease outside China, although it appears to have largely been contained thanks to an extensive "trace, test and treat" program. The country introduced a widespread social-distancing campaign since in February, urging people to stay home, with scores of events—from K-pop concerts to sports matches—cancelled and museums and art galleries closed. Gross domestic product shrank 1.4 percent year-on-year during the January to March period, the Bank of Korea said, its biggest decline since the fourth quarter of 2008 during the global financial crisis.

Private consumption fell 6.4 percent—the sharpest fall in

more than two decades—"as expenditures on goods and services both decrease", the central bank said.

The South is highly trade-dependent and it added that exports contracted by two percent due to decreases in automobiles, machinery and chemical products, while imports fell 4.1 percent. But officials warned of a bigger impact from the coronavirus pandemic in the coming months. "There are concerns that shocks to the real economy and employment may expand due to the global economic slump," finance minister Hong Nam-ki told a meeting of other ministers. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has forecast the world economy will contract three percent this year, as it is expected to "experience its worst recession since the Great Depression" over the pandemic. The IMF has predicted the South Korean economy will shrink 1.2 percent in 2020. —AFP

Sports

Rugby Australia chief eyes salvaging All Black Tests

SYDNEY: Rugby Australia chief Raelene Castle has raised hopes the Wallabies can face the All Blacks later this year, salvaging some Tests from the sport's coronavirus-ravaged international calendar.

Castle conceded that Ireland and Fiji were unlikely to tour Australia in July, while international travel restrictions mean Rugby Championship matches featuring South Africa and Argentina are also in doubt.

But she said both Australia and New Zealand had enjoyed early success in containing COVID-19, raising the prospect Bledisloe Cup matches between the Wallabies and All Blacks could proceed. "We're most likely to open up trans-Tasman borders first because both our gov-

ernments have taken quite a similar approach to this and really got this under control," Castle told the official rugby.com.au website.

There are three Bledisloe Cup Tests planned, one each in Melbourne and Wellington in August, then Brisbane in October. Castle said they could still go ahead even if they were delayed. "We'd like to think we could continue to deliver those and they're probably looking at later into that October or November time frame," she said.

Castle said a domestic Super Rugby competition of up to 12 rounds could precede the Bledisloe series. "Hopefully a five or six team home-and-away competition that can give some

real substance to finishing off what we started at the beginning of the year and really get the players back on the field," she said.

Meanwhile, four former Wallabies captains, including double World Cup winner John Eales, have spoken out against a call by their counterparts to overhaul the leadership of Rugby Australia, domestic media reported yesterday.

A letter — reportedly signed by 11 Wallabies skippers, including Nick Farr-Jones, George Gregan and Phil Kearns — was circulated earlier this week saying the governing body was in crisis and the game had "lost its way".

But yesterday one signatory, Michael Lynagh, said The Australian he had asked for his name to be removed from the letter as

he had not been fully briefed on its contents. "This is not the way I do things and I have withdrawn from the whole thing," he told the newspaper. "It doesn't mean I don't support the change but I had quite a few questions about what they were proposing.

"(RA) now have a new chairman and three new board members. They have got to be allowed to implement change." The Sydney Morning Herald reported that Wallabies great Eales, who won the Rugby World Cups in the 1991 and led the side to a second win in 1999, joined with former Test captain Mark Loane and ex-Rugby Australia president Tony Shaw to support cur-



The game had 'lost its way'



Rugby Australia chief Raelene Castle (right)

rent interim chair Paul McLean.

"We all recognise that rugby is going through a very difficult period," Eales told the newspaper. "I did not sign the letter because I felt it better to act on concerns directly, as a group, with the chairman, as he is already enacting considerable change.

"What I know is that there are good people across all levels of rugby working hard to solve complex problems." Shaw, who told the SMH he had not been approached to sign the letter, said its release had left him "gobsmacked".

"Why put it in the public domain when you have a chairman, who was a captain, just like you, who's done every job in rugby known to man — from player, captain, coach, administrator and president — and worked his butt off to work through the pandemic fallout in a short time frame," he said.

Australia are languishing seventh in the world rugby rankings and the game Down Under faces fierce competition from other sports that are increasingly gaining traction with wider audiences.—AFP

Woods, Mickelson could join Brady, Manning for May match

LOS ANGELES: Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson and NFL quarterback legends Tom Brady and Peyton Manning are planning a charity golf match for May, the US media reported on Wednesday. The event would be held without spectators in Florida, airing live on TV with the proceeds going to help battle the COVID-19 pandemic, American broadcaster ESPN reported.

Turner Sports said one possible date is Memorial Day weekend May 23-25. Manning, now retired, told a Denver radio station on Wednesday that there had been talks about such an event anyway. "And now, to have a chance to have a major fundraising event for COVID-19 relief, almost like a telethon if you will... if that can take place, I'm all in for that."

The Action Network reported that it is likely Woods and Manning will compete against Mickelson and Brady. Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis recently expressed support for the

event featuring golf superstars and football icons.

"I'd like to see Woods and Mickelson do the golf, or whatever, because that's social distance," DeSantis said last week. "You wouldn't have a gallery there. You wouldn't have crowds. But to put that on TV, I think people have been starved for content."

The PGA Tour said it hasn't officially endorsed the event but is evaluating health and safety concerns. One location said to be considered is Medalist Golf Club in Hobe Sound, Florida, located just north of Woods' home in Jupiter. The PGA Tour has suspended play since the first round of The Players Championship on March 12. The Tour's revised schedule released last Thursday would begin with a tournament June 11-14 in Fort Worth, Texas. In addition to the Fort Worth event, the other June tournaments currently slated to be held without fans are the RBC Heritage and the Travelers Championship. — AFP

I'd be happy for Seb to stay at Ferrari: Leclerc

LONDON: Charles Leclerc says he would be happy to have Sebastian Vettel continue as his Ferrari Formula One team mate next season, despite their clashes on track last year. Vettel, 32, is out of contract at the end of 2020 but Ferrari have said he is their first choice, subject to negotiations, to partner the young Monegasque whose deal runs until 2024.

A decision could come before the start of a season stalled by the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports in Italy have suggested, however, that Ferrari also have Renault's Australian Daniel Ricciardo and McLaren's Spaniard Carlos Sainz in mind as leading alternatives if a deal falls through.

"I am very happy with Seb," Leclerc told reporters in a virtual news conference. "It (the relationship) was good even though we've had some few problems on the track, like in Brazil. "I think it has always been a good relationship even though from the outside it was probably not seen as it was but it's always been good between us."

Leclerc beat Vettel on race wins, poles, points and podiums last year in what seemed at times an uneasy pairing of a hungry young gun with a champion used

to having top billing at Maranello.

They clashed on track on occasions, with their radio comments making headlines. "I will respect Ferrari's decision for whoever is next to me and at the end it's my job to adapt to the person next to me and you can always learn from whoever is your team mate," said Leclerc.

"I will welcome anybody. But if Seb stays I will definitely be happy." Leclerc has filled his time in lockdown with esports, training and doing his best to stay mentally in the zone needed to go racing.

He said the world of virtual racing had helped keep concentration levels up, with the 22-year-old winning four races last weekend including his second virtual F1 grand prix in succession. The next target is to race against Vettel in the virtual world as well.

Vettel told reporters last week that he had also recently got a simulator but, with three young children keeping him busy, had still to set it up properly. "I'm not racing against Seb yet but I will definitely send him a text very soon whenever he has finished his installation to try and race with him a little bit, which will be fun," commented Leclerc.—Reuters

Sports

India's Sachin Tendulkar, sport's most prolific run-accumulator

Country's mask production capacity hits 94 percent

NEW DELHI: Sachin Tendulkar compiled a mountain of runs for almost a quarter of a century and reached cricket's dizzying heights by defying a burden of expectation that would have crushed lesser mortals.

Whenever Tendulkar came to the crease, India's billion-plus population made secret deals with gods, froze where they were, clutched lucky charms and indulged in all sorts of superstitions. And the sport's most prolific run-accumulator created plenty of those heart-in-mouth moments in his 24 years in international cricket.

On other occasions, fans switched off their televisions as soon as Tendulkar was dismissed. For them, the rest of the match did not matter. The 34,000-plus international runs that Tendulkar amassed, including a record 100 centuries, speak as much of his hunger for runs as for his ability to handle pressure.

The unprecedented century of centuries included the first double hundred in the history of men's one-day internationals. It was quite an incredible cricketing journey that began with a rejection by Dennis Lillee.

The Australian pace great refused to entertain Tendulkar's dream of becoming a fast bowler at a Chennai academy. He asked the youngster, then a school student, to work on his batting instead. Tendulkar took the advice to heart and found a mentor in Ramakant Achrekar, who shaped several test careers in Mumbai. Achrekar would make Tendulkar sit behind him on his rickety scooter and crisscross Mumbai to

get him to bat in up to four matches a day.

Obsessed with batting, Tendulkar would get a friend to bowl at him with a soaked rubber ball, so the wet marks would confirm whether he was middling them. The curly-haired wunderkind with a sing-song voice made his India debut in 1989 on the tour of Pakistan, where Waqar Younis left the then 16-year-old with a bloodied nose in the Sialkot Test. Over the next two decades, it was the bowlers who bled runs as Tendulkar married his nearly-impregnable defence with a breathtaking array of shots.

DON COMPARISONS

He delighted the purists with his backfoot punch and wowed the crowd with the audacious upper-cut, managing to look equally elegant. His never-ending appetite to collect batting records drew comparisons with Australian great Don Bradman, who confided to his wife that the diminutive Indian reminded him of himself.

Throughout his career, Tendulkar somehow retained a childlike enthusiasm as well as deep respect for the game. In his book "The Barefoot Coach", former India mental conditioning coach Paddy Upton narrated an incident to illustrate Tendulkar's approach to the game.

During a net session, Ishant Sharma kicked the ball in frustration after struggling to find his rhythm. Tendulkar fetched the ball and, instead of throwing it back, he walked up to the young bowler. "...I heard him tell Ishant in a calm and measured tone, but with gravitas, that it was be-



Sachin Tendulkar

cause of this ball that he had the privileges he was currently enjoying in life," Upton wrote.

"Sachin Tendulkar had, and still has, the utmost respect for the game of cricket - he would not stand by and watch a youngster compromise this value." Tendulkar's captaincy stints were far from impressive but he famously solved a leadership crisis when he recommended Mahendra Singh Dhoni for the job.

Dhoni led India to, among other things, World

Cup triumphs in the 20-overs (2007) and 50-overs (2011) formats. After India won the 2011 World Cup final in Mumbai, Virat Kohli, who is tipped to scale similar heights as a batsman, and other team mates hauled Tendulkar on their shoulders for a victory lap. "Tendulkar has carried the burden of the nation for 21 years. It was time we carried him," Kohli famously said, summing up a grateful nation's sentiments for their favourite son. — Reuters

Handscomb optimistic Australia will hold T20 World Cup

SYDNEY: Australia batsman Peter Handscomb said he was hopeful the Twenty20 World Cup would proceed as planned later this year, citing signs other Australian sports were preparing to end COVID-19-related suspensions.

All sports including cricket are currently on hold in Australia and strict travel restrictions have cast doubt on whether the 16-nation tournament will go ahead in October and November. But Australia's success in containing the virus has seen the National Rugby League and Australian rules competitions working on plans to resume matches.

"Looking at what other sports are trying to do at the moment, it's great to see the football codes in Australia are looking to get back soon at least to training," Handscomb told reporters.

"They're going to try to start their seasons end of May, June-July. That could set a real good precedent for sport in Australia coming into our summer." Handscomb con-

ceded the international nature of the T20 tournament made it a more complicated proposition than domestic sporting contests, but said the signs were positive.

Australia's T20 captain Aaron Finch also believed the showpiece event would go ahead, even if it was delayed and played behind closed doors. "I think we might have to get our heads around a T20 World Cup that might be postponed for a month, two months, three months, whatever it has to be," Finch told Melbourne's SEN Radio Wednesday.

"But as long as we can get live sport up and running. Whether that's with crowds or not, I don't think that makes any difference to the players." International Cricket Council officials are holding a conference call on Thursday to discuss the international schedule.

Batting great Sunil Gavaskar suggested this week that India could host the World Cup if Australia continues to bar foreigners because of the virus. — AFP

Gronkowski tipped Brady about comeback

MIAMI: Rob Gronkowski said Wednesday he had hinted at the possibility of reuniting with Tom Brady months before his shock decision to come out of retirement and follow the six-time Super Bowl champion to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

In a conference call with reporters, Gronkowski said he had told former New England Patriots team-mate Brady he was taking a keen interest in the quarterback's career move after deciding he was ready to return to the NFL. Gronkowski stunned the NFL on Tuesday after announcing he was joining Brady at Tampa Bay next season after a one-year exile from the sport.

The 30-year-old tight end revealed he had long had his eye on where Brady might land as he entered free agency. Brady joined Tampa Bay last month after two decades with the Patriots.

"We rarely talked about what his decision was gonna be, where I'm at," Gronkowski said of his discussions with Brady. "I told him like, 'Hey, I'm kinda getting that fire underneath me again.'"

"I said, 'I'm definitely interested in the decision

that you make.' I didn't put any pressure on him." "I said, 'If there's a right opportunity out there, and [you] go somewhere and that opportunity is right — even if you go back to the Patriots and I feel like the opportunity is right — there's a possible chance that I would definitely love to reconnect.'"

Gronkowski spent nine seasons with the Patriots, winning three Super Bowls in tandem with Brady, before retiring in 2019. The chance to reunite with the quarterback regarded as the greatest in NFL history was too good to pass up, Gronkowski said.

"Playing with Tom is special. He's one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time," Gronkowski said. "And to build a connection with a quarterback, too, is something special. Every time we get together, it's just like the old days. It doesn't matter if we take a month off or six months apart; we just go out there and we're throwing the ball just like it's a normal practice, no matter what."

Gronkowski quit the NFL after helping the Patriots to their record-equalling sixth Super Bowl in a victory over the Los Angeles Rams in 2019. It followed a lengthy injury history which included multiple concussions as well as serious knee and back injuries. Gronkowski said the season out of sport had allowed his body to recuperate. "I said it from the beginning, that I wouldn't come back unless if I'm feeling it, unless if I'm feeling good, feeling healthy. And I'm feeling like I'm ready to go," Gronkowski said. — AFP

Sports

Players back Federer over tennis merger as Nick Kyrgios hits out

PARIS: WTA founder Billie Jean King and Rafael Nadal led a wave of support yesterday for Roger Federer's suggestion that "now is the time" to merge the men's and women's governing bodies, while tennis is at a standstill because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Federer, winner of a record 20 men's Grand Slam crowns, said a merger of the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and the men's Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) "probably should have happened a long time ago" in a series of tweets.

The Swiss great's idea for one "stronger body" received an enthusiastic response from King, Nadal and leading women's players such as former Wimbledon champions Simona Halep, Petra Kvitova and Garbine Muguruza, but controversial Australian Nick Kyrgios expressed reservations.

"Just wondering... am I the only one thinking that now is the time for men's and women's tennis to be united and come together as one?" Federer posed to his 12.7 million Twitter followers. Trailblazer King, who was instrumental in establishing the WTA in 1973, said such a merger "has long been my vision for tennis".

"I agree, and have been saying so since the early 1970s. One voice, women and men together... Let's make it happen," she tweeted. Nadal, who has 19 Grand Slam titles, posted: "I

completely agree that it would be great to get out of this world crisis with the union of men's and women's tennis in one only organisation."

Federer and Nadal argued that a merger could help tennis recover from the coronavirus shutdown, which has seen Wimbledon cancelled for the first time since World War II and the French Open postponed from May to the end of September.

"It probably should have happened a long time ago, but maybe now is really the time," Federer wrote. "These are tough times in every sport and we can come out of this with 2 weakened bodies or 1 stronger body."

“

Now is the time to merge

”

'HOW IS IT GOOD FOR US?'

He said the current system was "too confusing

for the fans when there are different ranking systems, different logos, different websites, different tournament categories". World number two and reigning Wimbledon champion Halep agreed, tweeting that Federer was "not the only one" thinking along those lines, while Muguruza added, "Yes, would be a good idea".

Two-time Wimbledon champion Kvitova tweeted: "Hands up if you agree with @rogerfederer," alongside a raised-hand emoji. But Kyrgios said he was yet to be convinced, adding that players should be consulted.

"Did anyone ask the majority of the ATP, what

April 22, Fulham went 950 kilometres by bus to Hamburg. In order to face Atletico Madrid in Spain, Liverpool covered 2,000 kilometres by train to Bordeaux, changing in London and Paris, and then went the last 700 kilometres by plane.

Lyon and Liverpool both lost 1-0, a disadvantage neither could overturn in the second legs. Fulham drew 0-0 on their way to their first European final. But the most volcanic encounter began at San Siro on April 20.

Barcelona made their 1,000-kilometre trek to Milan over two days, spending a night en route in Cannes. Coach Pep Guardiola used the 14 hours on the coach to show his squad match videos but they also watched Invictus and Inglourious Basterds. Meanwhile, in Milan, Mourinho schemed.

This tie might have marked the start of his spiky battle with Guardiola, but it was not the start of Mourinho's grudge with Barcelona.

Mourinho had joined Barca in 1996, when his mentor, Bobby Robson, became coach. Mourinho translated, but also organised training and played an increasing role in coaching, taking over the B team under Robson's successor, Louis van Gaal. Guardiola was team captain for most of Mourinho's time at the club. Mourinho made an explosive return with Chelsea in the Champions League in 2005. — AFP



Roger Federer

they think about merging with the WTA and how it is good for us?" tweeted the world number 40, renowned for his outspoken views. Three-time Grand Slam winner Stanislas Wawrinka claimed the subject had already been discussed by the ATP chairman Andrea Gaudenzi.

"It was not just a comment like that, there is more talk behind that. Gaudenzi at the ATP was already talking about it," he said during an Instagram Live with 18-time Grand Slam champion Chris Evert. Gaudenzi, who took charge in January, said last week that the subject of closer

collaboration had come up during talks about how to proceed when the COVID-19 crisis eases. "All of the bodies coming together and discussing the calendar, a way forward, player relief and many, many other topics. That could be the positive outcome of this," he said on ATP Tennis Radio. "Finally, the governing bodies of tennis and the Grand Slams are getting together and working collaboratively on the long-term future of the sport," confirmed the 46-year-old Italian, who as a player won three ATP Tour titles and reached 18 in the rankings. — AFP

Mourinho's ambush of Barca under volcanic cloud

PARIS: Ten years ago this week, Barcelona limped home from a Champions League semi-final first-leg defeat blaming a volcano thousands of kilometres away and stoking the smouldering fires of Jose Mourinho's feud with their club and their coach.

The eruption of Eyjafjallajökull on Iceland had sent a plume of ash drifting across Europe, grounding flights and playing havoc with the sports calendar.

A MotoGP race scheduled for Japan on April 25 was postponed until October because teams and riders could not get there.

As bad luck would have it, Newcastle United faced the longest away trip in English football on April 19. They made the 650-kilometre (404-mile) journey to Plymouth Argyle for a Monday night game by coach and won, 2-0, to secure promotion and relegate the hosts.

In Europe, Lyon travelled 730 kilometres to face Bayern Munich in the Champions League on April 21. For the Europa League semis on

Caution needed over return to football: Italy

ROME: Italy's sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora warned on Wednesday caution was needed as he promised a decision "in the coming days" on whether Italian football clubs can return to training amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Spadafora held a two-hour video-conference with representatives of Italian football, including federation chiefs, professional and amateurs leagues, players and doctors.

"I listened with great attention to the various positions that emerged and in the next few days, after a discussion with the Minister of Health and the Technical Scientific Committee, we will issue the updated provisions regarding the possibility and the procedures for a return to training," said Spadafora. All sport in Italy has been suspended for the past six weeks as the country grapples with the

COVID-19 crisis which has killed over 25,000 people.

"I can assure you that maintaining a profile of extreme prudence, as I am doing, is the most unpopular position imaginable," Spadafora later said in a post on Facebook.

"But we have the duty and responsibility to ensure that the whole country, obviously including the world of sport, can soon emerge from this health crisis. "I am also a fan who misses following my team.

"I was looking forward to the European championships this summer, but they will be postponed, like the Olympics, the Giro d'Italia and all sports competitions in our country.

"It is a huge disappointment, in a much bigger and deeper pain, in an atrocious mourning that has struck our country, Europe, the whole world." The 20 Serie A clubs voted unanimously on Tuesday to complete the league season, which has been suspended since March 9. The federation presented Spadafora with a medical code to allow the resumption of competition. Players could start training again, in small groups and under strict medical supervision, from May 4, the date on which the government plans to start easing the containment measures. — AFP

Sport Times

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Players back Federer over merger, Kyrgios hits out

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