



Some countries to repatriate their workers soon: Jarallah

Heat on visa traders • Back to school in China • Lockdowns easing worldwide

Saudi eliminates death penalty for crimes by minors

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia will no longer impose the death sentence on individuals who committed crimes while still minors, the state-backed Human Rights Commission (HRC) said in a statement, citing a royal decree by King Salman. "The decree means that any individuals who received a death sentence for crimes committed

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By B Izzak and Agencies

KUWAIT/BEIJING: A number of countries will start "very soon" to repatriate thousands of their nationals stranded in Kuwait who benefited from an amnesty offered by the government to illegal expats, Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah said yesterday. The workers have been living in temporary shelters set up by the authorities for the past few weeks after they registered with the interior ministry in order to leave the country, but their home nations were not ready to receive them.

"There are positive signs that these countries will repatriate their workers. I think that these workers will leave for their home countries very shortly," Jarallah told a local television channel. He however did not name any country nor did he provide any time-frame for the repatriation. The main countries include Egypt, India and Sri Lanka, who told Kuwait they are not in a position to receive thousands of their nationals because of the coronavirus shutdowns.

Jarallah said the foreign ministry had been in constant contact with those countries and their

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- 'Live' stars on sofas compete for fans (Page 20)
- Egypt seeks IMF aid amid downturn (Page 9)



BEIJING: An official in a hazmat suit waits inside a high school as a student arrives yesterday. — AFP (See Page 8)

Ramadan

KAREEM

Imsak	03:34	Asr	15:21
Fajr	03:44	Maghrib	18:22
Dhuhr	11:46	Isha	19:45

The key to safety is staying home.

Pandemic Diaries

Predictions



By Jamie Etheridge

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Kuwait's COVID-19 crisis will end June 5, according to statistical modeling data published by the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), Data-Driven Innovation Lab.

The SUTD published the predicted date for Kuwait among a series of charts predicting when COVID-19 will end for countries around the world. (<https://ddi.sutd.edu.sg/portfolio/items/444814>)

If it's correct, we can all celebrate, as June is only a month away and by the end of Ramadan, we will have a clear sense of what the summer holds. But is it correct? The charts utilize what is called a "SIR (susceptible-infected-recovered) model, regressed based on the data from different countries to estimate the pandemic life cycle curve and predict when the pandemic might end in different countries and in the world."

The SIR model uses dependent variables - number of susceptible individuals, number of infected individuals and number of recovered individuals - and then fractions of the three within the population as dependent variables. It then makes assumptions about each of these groups.

In the case of susceptible individuals, the SIR model assumes that no one is added to this group since most countries have halted immigration and closed borders. In Kuwait's case however, this assumption will not work out since the government is airlifting home around 50,000+ citizens (several thousands have already arrived) and it's possible that some asymptomatic individuals will be among them.

This is just one aspect of the model that might not apply to Kuwait. There are many different models now designed to try to predict the future trajectory of the crisis and each has its own limitations and challenges and different projections for when we might see the end of the crisis. To learn more about this one, you can read how the model is devised here: <https://www.maa.org/press/periodicals/loci/joma/the-sir-model-for-spread-of-disease-the-differential-equation-model>.

In looking at the model for Kuwait itself, we see that the peak may have already been reached, although the predicted number of cases according to the model is much less than the actual number of cases reported at the 'predicted peak'. Another inconsistency.

That said, the model may have some applicability and still offers a glimpse of the future. If it does hold true, then we should have reached or almost reached the peak and start to see a slow decline in new cases. Only time will tell. The government here expects the crisis to last much longer, though we may begin to see some limited reopening of shops after Ramadan.

We can only hope that we have reached the peak and start to move past this pandemic.

Chinese medical team arrives in Kuwait to aid in COVID-19 fight

Kuwaiti citizens' repatriation 4th phase kicks off April 29

KUWAIT: A Chinese medical team specialized in prevention and epidemics was set to arrive in Kuwait yesterday, Kuwait's Ambassador to China Sameeh Hayat said. The visit comes as part of China's efforts to extend a helping hand to other countries in a bid to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In a statement to the press, Ambassador Hayat said that the team will discuss latest developments on the virus with officials of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health. The Chinese team specializes in the fields of preven-

tion and control of infectious diseases, epidemiology, intensive medical treatment and DNA testing, he pointed out. The Ambassador expressed Kuwait's appreciation for the sincere efforts of the Chinese government in providing unlimited support to world countries, especially Kuwait, to contain and combat the pandemic and exchange experiences in the areas of control and prevention.

In other news, Kuwait's Directorate General for Civil Aviation (DGCA) Chairman Sheikh Salman Humoud Al-

Sabah on Sunday said fourth phase of evacuating citizens from abroad would take place on April 29 and proceed until May 6. Sheikh Salman Al-Humoud stated in a press statement that the fourth phase would include Los Angeles, Miami, Dallas, Washington, Montreal, Sidney and Berth. The operation will also cover a number of cities in Europe, Asia, South America and Africa where there are Kuwaiti citizens who booked electronically with international aviation companies in cooperation with Kuwaiti embassies. — KUNA



Kuwait's Ambassador to China Sameeh Hayat



KUWAIT: A combination of photos showing large crowds outside the residency affairs department's building in Dajeej Sunday, with lack of adherence to social distancing instructions to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has recorded 3,075 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as of Sunday, in addition to 20 deaths. With the exception of 61 cases in intensive care, all infected cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while hundreds have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 1,012 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, while there are 2,249 people receiving treatment and 1,367 quarantined as of yesterday. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested thousands of people. Meanwhile, Kuwait requires all expatriates who arrived from travel on March 1 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center to test people for possible infection.

Curfew

Kuwait enforced a country-wide curfew from 5:00 pm to 6:00 am, which was later extended to start from 4:00 pm until 8:00 am during Ramadan, while allowing restaurants and food stores to make home deliveries from 5:00 pm until 1:00 am. The government also locked down Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh in a bid to contain the spread of the virus and enable health workers to treat inhabitants. Earlier, the government decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The government also allowed supermarkets, restaurants and shops to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are lines, the distance must be at least one meter between people. The Ministry of Commerce launched a website (www.moci.shop) to enable people to book appointments to shop at co-operative societies in their areas. The Public Authority for Industry also announced that companies can apply to evacuate their workers from Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula. To do so, they must fill a 'workers evacuation form' available on www.pai.gov.kw, and send the form via email to: Jasiri@moh.gov.kw.

Precautions

Kuwait halted all commercial flights until further notice, and has sent special flights to repatriate

Kuwaitis back home from countries affected with the virus' spread. All arrivals to Kuwait from all countries are to be placed under compulsory institutional quarantine for 14 days, during which the person is monitored, and prescribed health procedures are applied, the health ministry said. Meanwhile, the Cabinet announced on April 9 the operation of all airline flights for expats who are wishing to return back to their countries. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to May 28, with work resuming on May 31, while entities providing vital services will remain open. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended classes for March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs): first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29, before eventually suspending schools until August for grade 12 and October for other stages.

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

Amnesty

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

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

25), other nationalities (April 26-30, 2020).

The Interior Ministry later opened two new locations in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh to receive residency violators from all nationalities: Female violators are received at Roufayda Al-Aslamaya School - Block 4 - Street 200, while male violators are received at Naem bin Masod School - Block 4 - Street 250.

Hotlines

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

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

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

Medicine delivery

Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MOH) launched a new medicine delivery service for people in Kuwait, which they can use to order medications to be delivered during curfew hours. The medications will be delivered within 72 hours after the order is submitted. To place an order, patients should send a WhatsApp to the numbers for the hospitals and medical centers as listed below. The patient should include their name, Civil ID number, hospital or clinic file number, mobile phone number and the medicine needed to the following numbers:
Amiri Hospital: 50880699
Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital: 50880755
Farwaniya Hospital: 50880852
Adan Hospital: 50880908
Jahra Hospital: 50881066
Sabah Hospital: 97632660
Jaber Hospital: 96992079
Ibn Sina Hospital: 99613948
Chest Hospital: 99258749

Razi Hospital: 97633487
Kuwait Cancer Control Center: 96735242
Psychiatric Hospital: 97350113
Physiotherapy Hospital: 99824037
Maternity Hospital: 98559531
As'ad Al-Hamad Dermatology Center: 98514508
Zain Hospital: 97552031
NBK Hospital: 96931761
Al-Rashed Allergy Hospital: 94162470
Infectious Diseases Hospital: 96989164
Palliative Care Hospital: 94024786
Sabah Al-Ahmad Urology Center: 90952469
KFH Addiction Treatment Center: 94169363
Meanwhile, all licensed pharmacies in Kuwait delivering medicine are allowed to continue their services 24 hours a day.

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

Mental health assistance

The Kuwait Psychological Association (KPA) is providing consultation through the phone for people suffering from the psychological impacts of coronavirus. Different doctors are working on the hotline in different timings as follows:
Dr Rashed Al-Sahl: on Monday and Wednesday 10:00 am - 1:00 pm. Call 9797-6168.
Dr Fahad Al-Tasha: daily from 8:00 pm - 12:00 am. Call 9904-8258.
Dr Othman Al-Asfour: daily 5:00 pm - 8:00 pm. Call 9938-5350.
Dr Mohammed Al-Khaldi (head of this team): daily 9:00 am - 12:00 pm. Call 9903-6470.
Dr Ahmad Al-Khaldi: daily 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 9910-7965.
Dr Muneera Al-Qattan: Monday and Wednesday 9:00 am - 1:00 pm. Call 9953-3108.
Dr Zainab Al-Saffar: Sunday and Thursday 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 9954-9908.
Dr Sameera Al-Kandari: Tuesday 9:00 pm - 12:00 am. Call 6770-9434.
Dr Kawthar Al-Yaqout: Monday and Wednesday 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 5521-0088.
For information and other concerns, call 9401-4283.

Local

Kuwaiti police arrest man who aided quarantine zone breach

Health ministry denies discharging COVID-19 patient

KUWAIT: A man who smuggled an individual out of the quarantined area of Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh has been apprehended by police, Kuwaiti authorities said on Sunday. The search and arrest of the suspect, an Arab national, was carried out after a video was leaked on social media showing a man leading another on a motorcycle out of the area, an Interior Ministry statement read. The suspect, who has since confessed to the charges, is employed at a co-operative society supermarket in the southern Mubarak Al-Kabeer

Meanwhile, an Egyptian man was found stabbed to death in Kuwait, Al-Rai reported on Sunday. "A pedestrian found the dead body of the Egyptian national in an under-construction house in Dasma," the newspaper said, adding that police launched an investigation and the dead body was sent to the forensic department. The Egyptian laborers in Kuwait occupied the second rank in the number of foreign workers with 10,000 workers, constituting 20.8 percent of the total expatriate labor force. Egypt comes after India, whose nationals form 917,000 Indian workers, according to a report by Al Shall, Financial and Economic Consulting company in April 2020.

In other news, the Ministry of Health (MOH) commented on a video that recently circulated on social media showing two men who, according to the person who recorded the video, were tested positive for COVID-19 at a local polyclinic and that one was hospitalized while the other was discharged. MOH explained that, when tested at the clinic, both patients showed respiratory disorder symptoms but none was confirmed as a positive COVID-19 case. The ministry added that both patients were referred to the area hospital for further tests. Further, MOH noted that the expat referred to in the video was fully tested at the hospital, has initially tested negative, and is currently quarantined.

Accordingly, MOH urges the public to be more ac-



curate prior to publication of unconfirmed reports, to convey complaints and remarks only through the rightful accredited channels and avoid spreading stories that would cause panic, warning that all needed legal actions would be taken against whomever spreads false allegations.

Man stabbed in Dasma

governorate. He has been referred to the public prosecutor's office as a search is underway for the other runaway individual. The Ministry of Interior warned that it would not be dissuaded from applying the law on those caught in violation of isolation measures set by authorities in the public interest.

NORKA begins registration: India plans evacuation

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: As the Indian government braces for a mammoth exercise of repatriating non-resident Indians from aboard on a 'priority basis', some Indian states are seeking repatriation of their communities without any further delays. India's ministry of external affairs has reportedly prepared an evacuation plan and is waiting for the clearance from the government to put the plan into action.

States like Kerala, Punjab, Goa, Rajasthan, Telangana and Tamil Nadu with larger overseas communities have expressed keenness in starting repatriations as soon as possible in strict compliance with COVID-19 safety and security protocols. While the state of Kerala announced that it is fully prepared to receive non-resident Keralites who wish to come back from overseas, NORKA (Non-Resident Keralites Affairs) has started registration of people who are stranded abroad fol-

lowing the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns.

"The repatriation will be on a priority basis," said N. Ajithkumar, Director of Kerala Pravasi Welfare Board. "Pregnant women, senior citizens, people affected with diseases other than COVID-19, people whose visas have expired, those who went abroad on visit visas and got stuck and people who are facing various difficulties will be given priority," he pointed out. However, he clarified that people need not hurry as no priority will be given to those who register first. NRIs have to register on the website www.norkaroots.org.

Ajithkumar said repatriation will commence as soon as the India government opens its airspace to airlines. According to initial reports, more than 150,000 Indians in various countries have already registered in 24 hours of the opening of registration. Out of 900,000 Indian residents in Kuwait, approximately 450,000 are from Kerala.

According to reports from New Delhi, India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla has prepared an elaborate evacuation plan on how the ministry plans to bring home Indians from abroad, with an exact count of who is where and how many flights it would take from each country to various states in India. Indians stuck in foreign countries will be brought home on chartered flights. The report said the survey of those who want to return is under progress.

India's ministry of external affairs has opened control rooms for repatriating expats and has sought opinions from state governments on the exercise of bringing back those who are stranded abroad. However, it is insisting that people should come back with COVID-19 negative certificates to help the administration. Indian missions abroad were reportedly asked to prepare lists and prioritize the evacuation of all Indian nationals per flight that would take off from their respective stations.

Three stores sealed for violating health precautions

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Commerce and Industry said yesterday its teams have sealed three stores for violating the preventive measures relating to combat against the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Teams from the ministry have inspected 182 consumer cooperatives, shopping malls and vegetables stores to verify their commitment to

the pricing rules, the ministry said in a statement, noting that seven stores were booked for violating the rules. The teams checked the orderliness of delivery of food rations to eligible recipients at 64 rationing centers. The emergency center of the ministry received 231 complaints via its hotline 135 and 30 complaints via the supervision centers, the statement said, adding that 127 ration cards have been renewed. — KUNA

Kuwait commends historic ties with India

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ambassador to India Jassem Al-Najem Sunday commended the historic relationship between Kuwait and New Delhi, and the two countries always seek to develop them in political and economic domains. Najem, in a press statement, said Kuwait and India were cooperating and coordinating to step up the fight against the novel coronavirus (COVID-

19). Kuwait and India share many principles in their foreign policies, like respecting UN Charter, non-interference in other countries' affairs and respecting sovereignty of nations, he said. Kuwait and India, said Najem, were looking forward for the joint committee meeting during the first quarter this year but the coronavirus forced postponement of the meeting. — KUNA

Kuwait embassy in Rome flies Italian flag in solidarity



ROME: Kuwaiti diplomatic mission raises the Italian flag. — KUNA

ROME: The Kuwaiti diplomatic mission has raised the Italian flag marking the European country national day, as part of an Arab gesture of solidarity with the Italians in their fight against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The Kuwait Embassy said in a statement on Sunday the symbolic gesture was part of an initiative, adopted by the council of Arab ministers in Italy for offering medical and humanitarian aid to the Italian government while it fights the contagion and its hard impact on the friendly Italian people. The statement said Arab em-

bassies' buildings were adorned with the Italian flag as of April 25, demonstrating the missions' participation in the national celebrations marking liberation of the country from the Nazi occupation. Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti Ambassador Sheikh Azzam Al-Sabah said the gesture constitutes a form of solidarity with Italy to affirm depth of the Arab-Italian historic and cultural bonds and as a salute to the Italian people for their will against the coronavirus as well as for sake of expressing solace with the afflicted and the medics. — KUNA

IN MY VIEW

Women's rights



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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As the world began to get more open and societies started to get closer to each other by various means, something started to develop slowly, and turned from being local into something universal. Many started to speak about human rights until it became an issue taken up by the United Nations, which issued the Declaration of Human Rights, which was considered by many as a milestone in the history of human rights.

It was then the turn of women to demand their rights and suffrage movements began to surface not only in the West, but also in many of the countries on this side of the hemisphere. It is unfortunate that Islam was and is still being criticized for being anti-woman, of oppressing her and depriving her of most of her basic rights, and the fact is it is to the contrary.

Women in the pre-Islam (jahiliya) era were under extreme oppression, ill-treated and disrespected, until the arrival of Islam 1,442 years ago, which liberated women from all types of slavery and restored her status. Arabs during jahiliya used to be very ashamed when a girl was born, to the point that it was mentioned in the Holy Quran: "And when one of them is informed of [the birth of] a female, his face became dark, and he suppresses grief * He hides himself from people because of the ill of which he has been informed. Should he keep it in humiliation or bury it in the ground? Unquestionably, evil is what they decide." (16-58, 16-59).

Fathers used to bury their daughters alive out of shame and to avoid any bad things that may occur later in life. Women in pre-Islam jahiliya used to be considered as property like anything in the house, to the point that her husband could gamble her away and worse, it used to be that the eldest son could inherit his father's wife. That is how bad things were, until the arrival of Islam, which abolished all of the above and restored women to their deserved status.

Islam aims at having justice among people - all people - including religious justice between men and women in most aspects of life. Their duties and accountability in front of Allah (God) is equal without any discrimination, as Almighty Allah said in the Holy Quran: "Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer - We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the beat of what they used to do." (16:97)

In fact Islam guaranteed to the woman her right to marry if she chooses to do so, and cannot be prevented from it if she is able to meet her duties as required. Meanwhile, Islam allowed the wife to ask for divorce if her husband cannot give her due rights or cause her any harm. Islam gave women the right to get into business in any legal form, while allowing her to use her own money the way she wants and forbade others including her husband or other relatives to force her to spend on certain things and not on others.

Now, we really do not have the right to blame Islam for any behavior that does not respect women's rights or deprives them of their freedoms, as many are the ignorant who are still among us.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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Last five days of amnesty for all expats underway

Long queues affected traffic in Farwaniya



KUWAIT: Large crowds gather at a school in Farwaniya turned into a center to receive visa violators wishing to avail the amnesty. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The first of the last five days of a general amnesty granted to all undocumented expatriates in Kuwait witnessed long queues of people at the processing center in Farwaniya on Sunday wanting to leave Kuwait without paying fines and a chance to return.

The Kuwaiti government granted an amnesty to undocumented expats from April 1-30. To make it more orderly, the interior ministry organized applicants by nationality, starting with Filipinos (April 1-5), Egyptians (April 6-10), Bangladeshis (April 11-15), Indians (April 16-20) and Sri Lankans (April 21-25). The last five days (April 26-30) are for applicants of all nationalities.

The long queue of applicants at both the female and male processing centers in Farwaniya affected the movement of vehicles nearby. They came with their luggage, as approved amnesty applicants will be sent to holding areas until airlines are ready to fly them home. Their airfare will be covered by the Kuwaiti government.

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



KPC to coordinate with clients on slashing oil output

KUWAIT: Kuwait Petroleum Corporation declared on Sunday it would coordinate with clients in international markets to cut its supplies of the Kuwaiti crude oil in line with the State of Kuwait adherence to the recent accord reached between OPEC and the organization partners, effective as of May 1. The KPC affirmed in a statement its full support to the country role as to ensuring success of the deal for serving all stakeholders' interests and for sake of restoring balance to the global oil markets. OPEC member states and non-OPEC partners agreed at a meeting on April 13 on slashing the oil output by 9.7 million barrels per day as of May 1 for a preliminary period extending for two months and ending on June 30. They also agreed on decreasing the production for a six month period from July 1 until December 31 at a rate of 7.7 million bpd. —KUNA

local spotlight

Oil drop



By Muna Al-Fuzai

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Oil prices fell drastically in March and are still falling. This decline is very worrying for most countries of the world, whether industrial or oil countries such as the Gulf states, including Kuwait in particular, which leads to the question about the repercussions of the prices on the economy of the GCC. This matter requires serious action before dealing with the consequences and not the problem.

I am surprised that at a time when thousands of press, media and medical reports circulated on the subject of the coronavirus crisis, both for guidance on the seriousness of the matter and its follow-up, the biggest focus was on ways to provide sufficient resources to support medical studies and research, vaccines, provide food security for people, how to maintain a coherent economy and protect the world from inflation, unemployment rate and poverty, but the issue of falling of oil prices is without many solutions.

This article will not analyze the circumstances or political differences between major countries that led to this decline. What concerns me more as a citizen and an activist from the Gulf or the so-called oil-rich states are the results, because the failure to reach an agreement regarding the levels of output reduction and ensuring commitment from all sides will eventually lead to a price war between oil-producing countries.

Oil prices fell in the European market in conjunction with the world's preoccupation with medical developments to combat the coronavirus, which requires large financial funds to confront it, and the closing of economic activities to reduce the spread of the epidemic. Of course, the turmoil in the global financial markets led to a decline in oil prices, and it is expected to continue in light of the shutting down of economies of major Western countries. So unless a miracle vaccine comes to us that cures everyone and the economic machine returns as it was before, we will need to worry for some time, especially with the suspension of aviation, which increases the severity of the oil market crisis.

I believe that this crisis puts the budgets of the Gulf states in a real predicament that must be faced with swift solutions unless a plan is reached to return oil prices to levels of \$50 per barrel, because government expenditures in a country like Kuwait are huge in light of increased spending on coronavirus measures, quarantines, hospitals and the cost of treatment. So keeping a fixed ceiling on spending of each government agency according to its needs is required. Also grants and loans to countries must be reviewed until we pass through this crisis.

I think with the continued decline in crude oil prices in the long run, the implications will lead to depleting financial reserves. The increase in oil revenues in the past led to reliable financial surpluses to mitigate the effects of low oil prices, as sovereign funds can bear the losses of price dropping to less than \$10 a barrel, but this will not be sufficient to prevent an economic downturn in the long run.

The challenges that are facing Gulf governments, including Kuwait now, are more difficult. Although economic growth created a significant improvement in the standard of living and infrastructure, it has not generated enough job opportunities, especially for young Kuwaiti graduates, so the problem of citizen unemployment is something that will have negative impacts. Setting a ceiling for expatriate labor with the required skills, combating marginal labor and returning non-compliant expatriates to their homeland should not be a matter of dispute.

On April 1, the Kuwaiti government approved an economic package worth \$5 billion as a first stage that included a set of recommendations related to addressing the economic repercussions resulting from the coronavirus crisis. The approval of this economic package aims to ensure the continuation of economic activities and ensure social protection of citizens and the preservation of Kuwaiti national employment conditions in the private sector. That is indeed a very wise and correct decision.

The package also aims to cover the cost of the vacation granted by the state to workers in the government and private sectors due to the outbreak of the coronavirus, which amounts to \$5.1 billion per month, while the value of wages of workers in the public sector, both citizens and residents, is 3.5 billion per month, keeping in mind that the salary item constitutes more than 50 percent of the budget. For 2020, I believe this is a large bill paid by the government, especially since all the Gulf countries set the price of a barrel of oil at \$50 in their budgets for 2020.

Kuwait has always had a wise financial policy despite huge spending, but peaceful economic treatment now will protect us from the unknown.

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Local

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: The Mubarakiyah School was the first school to open in Kuwait in 1911. It was named after Kuwait's seventh ruler Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah. The school improved on the basic instruction available at the time, which had only included reading, writing and arithmetic. In 1921, another school was opened; the Ahmadiyah school, while the first school for girls opened in 1939. The picture shows students attending an English language class circa 1937. (Source: 'Kuwait in the Eyes of Early Photographers,' William Facey, Gillian Gran, London, 1989. — Prepared by: Mahmoud Aakaria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

Ramadan, month of the Quran

By Dr Teresa Leshner

One of the distinguishing features of Islam is its Holy Book, the first verses of which were revealed in the month of Ramadan, 1453 lunar years ago (610 AD). During the course of 23 years, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) received Quranic verses as spoken addresses from the Creator - the Quran is considered the speech of God in the Arabic language. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) then recited the verses so that they could be memorized verbatim, and they were also recorded in writing. Before he died, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) specified the order of verses and the division of chapters, according to divine instruction. The original Quran is still preserved until today with precise pronunciation, with the Arabic language developing to represent it phonetically. It is the only revelation or divine book that contains the pure words of God without being rephrased by His messengers or any other human being.

The Quran is addressed to all mankind. Sometimes Muhammad (PBUH) is specifically addressed with instructions such as "They ask you about... Say [to them]..." Muhammad is also encouraged and sometimes gently reproached in the Quran. Believers are addressed with specific instructions on how to achieve both temporal and eternal success. And mankind in general is addressed with invitations to believe in God and mold life around that belief, and they are informed of the consequences of accepting or rejecting God's invitation.

The Quran's purpose is to inform people of a reality beyond their five senses and their perceptions of space and time, and to teach moral lessons and develop spirituality. With the additional perspective it offers, the Quran also invites people to adopt a lifestyle that ensures ultimate happiness and success. Finally, through stories and instruction, it describes the beliefs and practices that are essential to achieve that state.

The verses of the Quran were revealed to address particular situations, to relate historical information and to codify Islamic law. Common subjects are descriptions of God,

stories of prophets, descriptions of believers and disbelievers, promises of God's rewards, especially Paradise, warnings about consequences for rebellion toward God, including Hellfire, instructions for personal conduct, guidelines for familial and social relations, and a framework for international relations.

Being an oral revelation first and foremost, devout Muslims learn how to recite the holy scripture as it was revealed. Verbatim memorization is common and care is taken to reproduce the exact pronunciation and vocal duration of each letter. Arabic is a rich language, and words of the Quran have great depth and breadth; therefore, they also study the meaning of the words, verses and chapters, and there are encyclopedic works of this nature. In addition, Muslims study the occasions of revelation, the relation of the holy text to prophetic traditions, and the application of principles by renowned scholars and rulers. The study of the Quran develops moral reasoning and spirituality first and foremost, as well as thought processes of logic, sequencing, deduction, intuition, assimilation and abstraction. Reciting and memorizing it develops memory, enunciation and self-expression.

The printed Quran is revered as a holy book and is treated with respect. It is not considered casual reading or handled like an ordinary book. There is only one version of the Quran, and careful measures are taken that prints and reprints of the Quran in Arabic are authenticated by authoritative bodies for accuracy. Since the Quran is an Arabic-language literary masterpiece both technically and aesthetically, it is impossible to portray its rhythm, rhyme, depth of denotation and subtlety of connotation in another language. There are many translations of the Quran, but we cannot call a translation "the Quran" but only an approximation of the meaning of the Quran. The best English translations have the accompanying original text in Arabic so that it can be consulted.

Since Ramadan is the month of the Quran, everyone should have their copy handy and complete reading it in this holy month.

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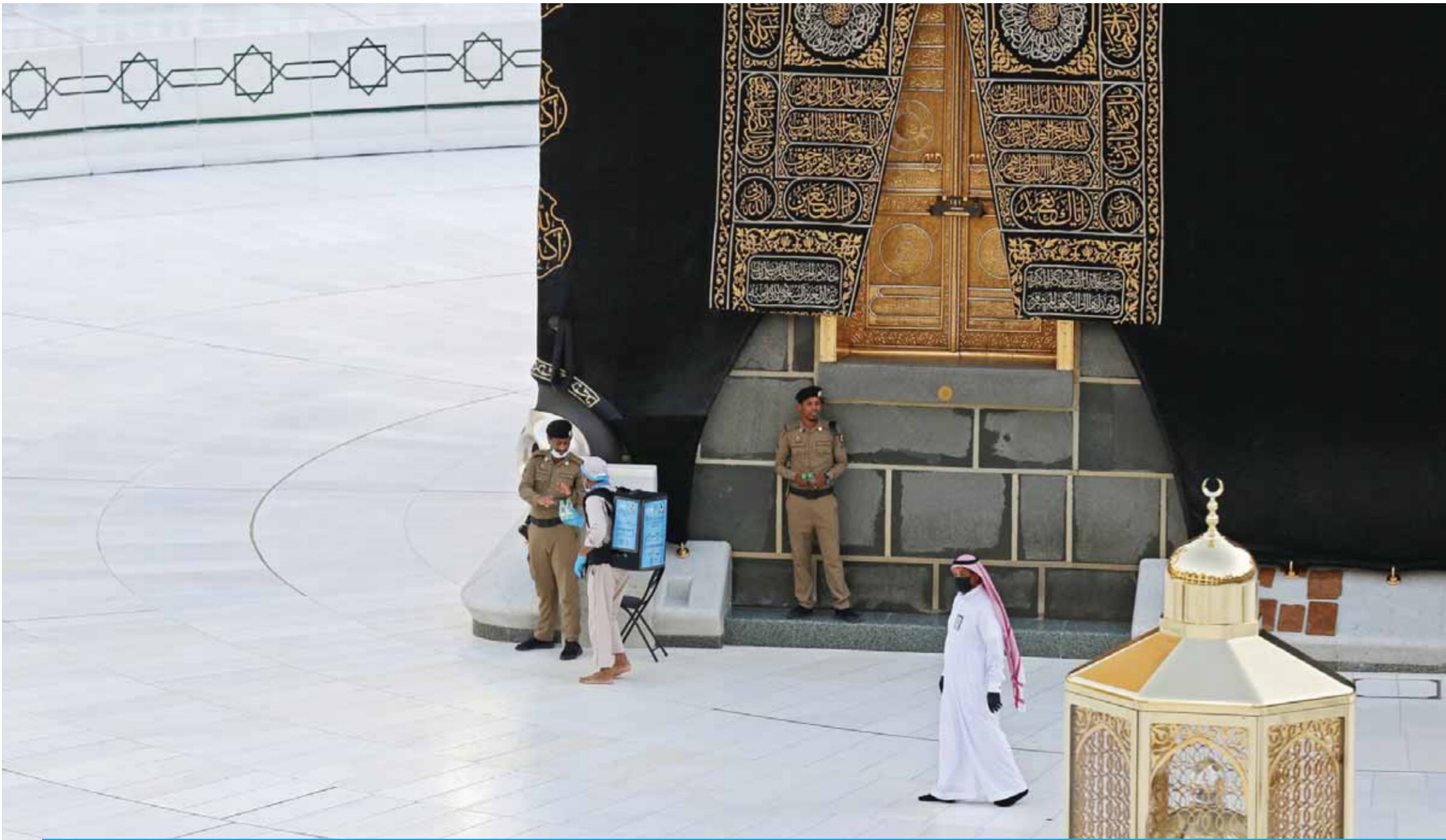


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Students return to class in Shanghai and Beijing

India's rural poor may lose out as drones map village land



MAKKAH: Saudi policemen stand guard next to the Kaaba in Makkah's Grand Mosque during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, amid unprecedented bans on family gatherings and mass prayers due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. — AFP

COVID-19: Asia's mosques deserted

Coronavirus keeps Ramadan faithful away

JAKARTA: It is a Ramadan like never before for Muslims across Asia as mosques that would normally be packed for prayers are deserted and in some places locked up as governments enforced measures to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. At Indonesia's main Istiqlal mosque, the biggest in Southeast Asia, the call to evening Maghrib prayers and a message asking people to pray at home echo in the empty hall - a stark contrast to last year when thousands thronged in to pray.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, has confirmed 8,882 cases of the coronavirus and at least 743 people have died. In Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, the gates of the Mayor Mohammad Hanif Jame Mosque were padlocked. In the Pakistani city of Karachi, police patrolled

outside the Faizan-e-Madina, one of the city's biggest mosques, to stop worshippers from gath-



Iran plans to reopen mosques

ering and no one was performing Taraweeh, a special prayer during Ramadan.

Pakistan has reported more than 11,000 cases of the coronavirus, including 237 deaths. In India, only five worshippers joined an evening prayer on the first day of Ramadan in New Delhi's imposing Jama Masjid as the call to prayers drifted out over the deserted courtyard. Last year, worshippers spilled onto the ornate front terrace of the red-brick 17th century mosque.

India has reported 26,496 cases of the coronavirus and 824 deaths. Health experts have warned that the rapid spread of the coronavirus in poor, densely populated parts of South Asia - home to a fifth of the world's population - could easily overwhelm weak public health systems.

Iran to reopen mosques
Meanwhile, Iran plans to reopen mosques in

parts of the country that have been consistently free of the coronavirus outbreak as restrictions on Iranians gradually ease, President Hassan Rouhani said on Sunday. Iran, one of the Middle Eastern countries hardest hit by the pandemic, will be divided up into white, yellow and red regions based on the number of infections and deaths, Rouhani said, according to the presidency's website. Activities in each region will be restricted accordingly, so an area that has been consistently free of infections or deaths will be labeled white and mosques could be reopened and Friday prayers resumed, Rouhani said. He said the label given to any region in the Islamic Republic could change and he did not specify when the color-coding program would come into force. — Agencies

Saudi ramps up COVID testing

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia has announced a \$265 million deal with a Chinese firm to ramp up coronavirus testing as the kingdom eased a 24-hour curfew, except in hotspots including Islam's holy city of Makkah. The agreement with China's Beijing Genome Institute (BGI) will provide for nine million COVID-19 tests, the government said in a statement. It said in line with the agreement "500 experts, specialists, and technicians" would come from China to conduct the tests.

The deal, which has a total value of 995 million riyals, also includes "the establishment of six large regional laboratories in a number of areas in the kingdom, including a mobile laboratory with a production capacity of 10,000 tests daily", it added. Earlier the government decided to relax a nationwide curfew between 9am and 5pm, with malls and retailers allowed to reopen until May 13, according to the official Saudi Press Agency.

But a round-the-clock lockdown will be maintained in some areas including Mecca, where the highest number of infections have been recorded in recent days despite the city being sealed off. Many countries around the Middle East and North Africa have the easing of lockdown restrictions to coincide the holy fasting month of Ramadan which began on Friday. Saudi Arabia, which has reported the highest number of infections in the Arab world, is scrambling to limit



RIYADH: Customers queue to pay for groceries at a supermarket during a nationwide curfew to stem the spread of COVID-19 in the Saudi capital Riyadh. — AFP

the spread of coronavirus at home.

On Sunday, the health ministry said the number of deaths from COVID-19 had risen to 139, confirmed infections to 17,522 while 2,357 people have recovered. Last month, Saudi Arabia suspended the year-round "umrah" pilgrimage over fears of the coronavirus pandemic spreading in Islam's holiest cities. Authorities are yet to announce whether they will proceed with this year's hajj, scheduled for the end of July, but they have urged Muslims to temporarily defer preparations for the annual pilgrimage.

annual pilgrimage.

Last year, some 2.5 million faithful travelled to Saudi Arabia from across the world to participate in the hajj, which Muslims are obliged to perform at least once during their lifetime. The Arab world's biggest economy has also closed cinemas, malls and restaurants and halted flights as it attempts to contain the virus. King Salman has warned of a "more difficult" fight ahead against the virus, as the kingdom faces the economic impact of virus-led shutdowns and crashing oil prices. — AFP

Virus breaks funeral traditions in Italy

REVELLO: The coffins are sealed directly at the hospital morgue near the tiny Italian town of Revello on the French border. Everyone in Revello understands it is safer that way since so many of those who have died across Italy's pandemic-hit north first contracted the novel coronavirus. The tradition of families passing by open caskets to say silent farewells to the deceased at churches or at funeral parlors has been abandoned.

"It is much more difficult, emotionally," Revello's funeral parlor owner Gianpiero Palmero told AFP. Large funerals have been banned in Italy for more than a month because of the new illness that has officially killed more than 26,000 people in the Mediterranean country since February. The real toll is unknown since many of those

who pass away in old age are never tested for the virus.

The rushed funeral arrangements mean grieving families have almost no time to say their final goodbyes. Palmero takes it personally. "We really are living in abnormal times," Palmero says. "There is more demand for our services." Italy is cautiously approaching the moment when it is ready to lift some of its harshest restrictions on everyday life. People might be allowed to walk the streets freely starting on May 4. Mores stores and churches will probably reopen.

And weddings and funerals might soon again involve more than just the pastor and immediate family members. But Italy is not there yet - and Palmero still collects his bodies at the hospital in nearby Saluzzo. "The bodies are already wrapped in a shroud," he explains. "We put the body in the coffin and seal it immediately." Social distancing measures are even observed at the crematorium. Only one person is allowed inside at a time. Not catching or spreading the virus is the overriding consideration in Palmero's business. "There are no more real funerals," he laments. — AFP



REVELLO: Owner of funeral home company 'Palmero' Gianpiero Palmero pulls a coffin at his company's offices in Revello, near Cuneo, northwestern Italy, during the country's lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 infection. — AFP

International

UK reports lowest virus toll in weeks as Johnson returns

Coronavirus leaves 20,732 dead in Britain

LONDON: Britain has reported its lowest daily rise in coronavirus deaths in nearly four weeks as officials confirmed Prime Minister Boris Johnson had returned to Downing Street after recovering from the virus. The number of people who have died rose by 413 to 20,732, officials said on Sunday, the lowest reported daily increase in April.

The last time the health department recorded a smaller increase was on March 31, when 381 deaths were registered. The latest figures were published just hours before Johnson returned. "I can confirm that the prime minister has returned to Downing Street," an official told AFP. Johnson resumes his duties yesterday after recovering at his country residence since his release from hospital on April 12.

And immediate concern will be deciding whether to relax strict social distancing rules. Despite the slowdown—which came at a weekend when the toll has often been lower—Environment Secretary George Eustice said on Sunday that lockdown rules should remain in place. "There are encouraging signs of progress," he said at a daily press briefing. "But before we consider it safe to adjust any of the current system distancing measures, we must be satisfied that we have met the

five tests set last week."

These included making sure the British health service (NHS) was able to cope, and a "sustained and consistent" fall in the daily death rate. The UK was initially placed into lockdown on March 23. This was extended on April 16 and a review is due on May 7. Eustice echoed statements made by Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab—who has been deputizing for Johnson—that the rules would "be with us for some time" and were the "new normal". There had been calls for the rules to be relaxed from within the ruling Conservative Party.

The new opposition Labor party leader Keir Starmer meanwhile wrote to Johnson on Sunday asking for details of a potential lifting of restrictions. He accused the government of mistakes at the beginning of the crisis, adding: "The government cannot fall short in its preparations for what happens when the time is right for lockdown

measures to be lifted." Sunday's figures also showed another 4,463 people had tested positive for the virus, bringing the total to almost 153,000.

Influence row

Despite Sunday's lower death toll Britain remains one of the worst-hit countries in the world by the virus. The government has been under scrutiny, especially over shortages in protective equipment and a lack of widespread testing, particularly of frontline health and social care workers. Meanwhile, a row continues over the role played by Johnson's chief adviser Dominic

Cummings, after it emerged he attended meetings of the main scientific group advising ministers on the coronavirus pandemic.

The government denied Cummings and another advisor were members of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) - a body that is

There are encouraging signs of progress

Faces from Africa's anti-virus frontlines

DAKAR: Across Africa, obscure or forgotten health and government officials have been propelled into the public eye because of their role in fighting coronavirus. Some are unsung veterans of previous efforts to stop epidemics, such as Ebola or AIDS. Others are from a younger generation, making a name for themselves on social media.

Zweli Mkhize, South Africa

South Africa's indefatigable health minister, Zweli Mkhize, has an upbeat motto in a video message on coronavirus aired regularly on public television: "Stay calm, focused and courageous". The doctor-turned-politician is constantly on the move across the virus-ravaged country, meeting local health staff and officials, while driving home health advice on social media and in polished television interviews. Mkhize, 64, is also a veteran of South Africa's struggle against AIDS. When he was a provincial cadre of the ruling African National Congress party, he personally wrote to former President Thabo Mbeki—a HIV/AIDS-denialist—to urge him into action. The editor of South African weekly City Press has described him as "clever, able and smart".

Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, Sierra Leone

The mayor of Sierra Leone's capital Freetown is determined to slow the spread of coronavirus in the

West African city, but she has her work cut out for her. Nearly half of the roughly one million inhabitants of the seaside capital have no access to running water, which is essential for hand-washing. Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, 52, is pushing to provide access to water urgently. "We need to fill those gaps as (a) government and fill them very quickly," she recently told French media.

A former finance professional with a master's degree from the London School of Economics, Aki-Sawyer is another of Africa's old epidemic warhorses. She was the director of planning for Sierra Leone's national Ebola response team, when the virus killed nearly 4,000 people in the country between 2014 and 2016, and was awarded an Order of the British Empire for her efforts. Known for her smily demeanour and her determination, Freetown's first female mayor also set a good example at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, by isolating herself for two weeks after returning from abroad.

Jean-Jacques Muyembe, DRC

Jean-Jacques Muyembe is one of a small number of people who can claim to be mangaging two epidemics of global importance. A discrete and affable man who looks younger than his 78 years, the Congolese virologist's life has been intimately linked to the Democratic Republic of Congo's ten Ebola outbreaks.

In 1976, he was one of the first to research the then-unknown Ebola virus in the field—without protective gear. He went on to play a critical role in identifying the viral haemorrhagic fever, and in finding its treatment. Muyembe is now the DRC's

decades with the hard left Unidas Podemos party, another former foe of the Socialists, following delicate negotiations. Though strains loomed on issues from Catalan separatism to immigration and labor reforms, the coalition got off to a relatively smooth start, to the relief of investors in the European Union's (EU) fourth largest economy.

Then along came COVID-19. Spain has had one of the world's worst outbreaks, with more than 22,500 deaths. The crisis has shredded its economy, with hotels and beaches empty, crops unpicked in fields due to lack of foreign workers, and an 8% contraction forecast. While there has been solidarity around the lockdown in place since March 14, now that the infection peak has passed and attention is turning to easing restrictions and economic recovery, Sanchez is scrambling to find the broad support he needs.

For weeks, he has been calling for unity and reconstruction within both Europe and Spain - but he appears to have been more successful abroad, where Madrid this week helped push EU leaders into agreeing a 1 trillion euro emergency fund. "We see the pact in Europe for reconstruction moving forward. Perhaps it is time for it to move forward in Spain as well," said Foreign Minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya. But so far, among conservative opposition forces, only the 10 lawmakers of Ciudadanos party have said they will support his pact, while others parked the issue in a congressional committee. —Reuters

from the country's privacy watchdog.

Paris has identified 17 priorities for gradually bringing the country out of lockdown in a "controlled, progressive" manner from May 11. These include reopening schools, companies returning to work, getting public transport back to normal, supplying masks and sanitizer, testing policy and support for the elderly.

However, the plans, drawn up by the government's scientific advisors, have been questioned in some quarters, notably by schoolteacher unions who expressed doubt as to whether measures such as keeping classes strictly apart were feasible. A dozen ministers will on Monday consult with representatives of local authorities to discuss various options. France has been in lockdown since March 17 and the government faces a deli-

The world's nations spent a combined \$1.9 trillion (1.78 trillion euros) on their militaries in 2019, according to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Compared to 2018, that represented an annual growth of 3.6 percent, the largest spending growth since 2010.

"Military spending has reached the highest point since the end of the Cold War," Nan Tian, a researcher at SIPRI, told AFP. Driving the increase are the world's largest spenders, headed by the US, which spent \$732 billion in 2019, a 5.3

percent increase, alone accounting for 38 percent of global spending. 2019 marked the second year of growth in US military spending after seven years of decline.

For the first time, two Asian countries were among the top three, with China and India spending an estimated \$261 billion (up 5.1 percent) and \$71.1 billion (up 6.8 percent) respectively. While Chinese expenditure over the past 25 years has closely followed the country's rapid economic expansion, their investments also reflect their ambition of a "world class military". —AFP



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gives a statement in Downing Street in central London yesterday after returning to work following more than three weeks off after being hospitalised with the COVID-19 illness. —AFP

supposed to be independent. Officials said the advisers attended SAGE meetings to "understand better" the scientific debates. A former Conservative frontbencher, David Davis, tweeted: "We should publish the membership of SAGE: remove any non-scientist members." —AFP

News in brief

Syria intercepts 'Israeli' missiles

DAMASCUS: Syrian air defense intercepted several missiles fired during an "Israeli" air strike yesterday against targets near the capital Damascus, the official SANA news agency reported. It did not give details of the positions targeted shortly before dawn but said the military "shot down a number of missiles before they reached their targets". SANA described it as "Israeli aggression" carried out from Lebanese airspace. Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes in the country, targeting government troops as well as allied Iranian forces and fighters from Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, enemies of the Jewish state. On April 20, SANA said Syrian air defenses had downed Israeli missiles near the ancient city of Palmyra. —AFP

Roads blocked in protest

BEIRUT: Demonstrators blocked roads through Lebanon late Sunday to protest the deteriorating economic situation, despite a lockdown and curfew imposed because of the coronavirus, according to the official news agency. Police quickly intervened to reopen the highways where the demonstrators burned tyres to block roads, the ANI national news agency said. In Zalqa sector, northeast of Beirut, six people were injured, Lebanese Red Cross official Rodney Eid said without providing further details. An AFP photographer saw protesters setting tyres ablaze on the highway north of the capital, in the suburbs of Dbaiyeh, before the army and police moved in. Protesters also mobilized in the main northern city of Tripoli, according to ANI. And south of Beirut, young people set tyres ablaze on the Damour highway, the agency said. —AFP

Troops disperse Muslims

MORONI: Security forces in the Comoros have used teargas against Muslims who had congregated in mosques in violation of coronavirus lockdown rules, witnesses and a security source said on Sunday. The incidents occurred in two locations on the Comoros island of Anjouan, according to a security source who asked not to be named. A witness said that "people were injured, most of them fled through the windows, one of them broke their foot", adding that "even this morning there was still a smell of gas in the area". President Azali Assoumani on Friday signed a decree strengthening anti-virus measures, which now include a nightly curfew. The Comoros—a predominantly Muslim Indian Ocean island group with around 40 percent of its population living in poverty according to the World Bank—is one of few countries without any officially registered coronavirus cases. —AFP

'Black market' face masks

BOBIGNY: French police have seized 140,000 face masks intended for the black market in a record haul since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. It is the largest seizure since the French government banned the resale of protective masks to prioritise their distribution to health workers in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Two individuals were arrested while they were unloading boxes in Saint-Denis, just north of Paris, a police source said on Sunday. One of them said he was a business owner and had bought the masks, including 5,000 high protection FFP2 masks, in the Netherlands for a total of 80,000 euros (\$87,000). The masks were to be sold to construction workers for a large profit, according to police. In March, 32,500 masks from China were seized from a warehouse near Paris and 28,800 masks were discovered in a shop in a district of Chinese wholesalers, also in the Paris region. —AFP

Honeymoon over, Spain's coalition tested by COVID

MADRID: Spain's Socialist-led government marked its first 100 days in power by passing an emergency decree with the help of its eternal adversary the conservative People's Party. But that rare show of unity merely masked deeper problems as the coronavirus crisis has cut the coalition's honeymoon and triggered aggressive opposition to Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's national reconstruction masterplan.

"Do you intend to stand like Nero, playing the fiddle while Rome burns?" People's Party (PP) leader Pablo Casado taunted Sanchez, even after supporting the state of emergency extension. "Don't give up, Mr. Sanchez. Before talking about reconstruction, we must avoid destruction," he added, opposing Sanchez's talk of a national "pact" for economic recovery similar to one in the late 1970s after dictator Francisco Franco.

After four inconclusive elections in four years, Sanchez in January formed Spain's first coalition government in

French PM presents strategy on ending COVID-19 lockdown

PARIS: French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe will today present the national strategy for emerging from the coronavirus lockdown, his office said. His announcement at the National Assembly will be followed by a debate and a vote. An app for tracing contacts of confirmed cases is also due to be unveiled today and Sunday received approval, albeit conditional,

Military expenditure saw biggest increase in a decade in 2019

STOCKHOLM: Global military expenditure saw its biggest uptick in a decade in 2019, researchers said yesterday, marking the first year two Asian countries were among the top three spenders.

International

Students return to class in Shanghai and Beijing

China's major cities gradually return to normality

BEIJING: Tens of thousands of students returned to school in Shanghai and Beijing yesterday after months of closures intended to curb the spread of the coronavirus, as China's major cities gradually return to normality. Shanghai students in their final year of middle and high school returned to classrooms, while only high-school seniors in Beijing were allowed back on campus to prepare for the all-important "gaokao" university entrance exam.

China has largely curbed the spread of the deadly disease, but is still on high alert with growing fears of imported cases and a second wave of domestic infections in the northeast. Teenager Meng Xianghao said he was taking extra precautions on his first day back at Beijing's Chenjinglun High School. "I brought masks, garbage bags and disinfectant," Meng, who had just taken the subway for the first time in months, told AFP as children in masks and uniform trackuits filed past police and officials to enter the school.

"I'm glad, it's been too long since I've seen my classmates," said 18-year-old student Hang Huan. "I've missed them a lot." A tent set up at the entrance was staffed by a person in a white hazmat suit, while a man wearing a container of disinfectant on his back sprayed the ground by the school gates. Across the country, schools that have been closed or online-only since January began gradually

reopening last month, while virus epicenter Wuhan is set to reopen its high schools on May 6.

Students in the capital will have their temperatures measured at school gates and must show a "green" health code on a special app that calculates a person's infection risk, according to China's Ministry of Education. The ministry said some schools in Beijing had rehearsed the reopening with mock "students" in advance.

Welcome speeches

Footage from the Communist Party-run Beijing Daily showed some of the city's 49,000 high-school seniors

in classrooms Monday, wearing masks at desks which were spaced evenly apart as teachers welcomed them back with speeches. A screen at the front showed a photo of Chinese President Xi Jinping, as the teacher talked to the class about the significance of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic.

In some cafeterias, students are assigned fixed seating spots spaced at least one meter apart. Beijing still has strict measures in place to prevent a fresh outbreak, requiring visitors to the city to pass stringent testing requirements and complete lengthy quarantine periods. In Shanghai, some schools have set aside special rooms for isolating students with "abnormal temperatures," the ministry said. Beijing student Xiao Shuhan told AFP he thought some



SHANGHAI: Students wearing face masks arrive at the Huayu Middle School in Shanghai yesterday. Students returned to class yesterday for the first time since schools were closed down in January as part of efforts to stop the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

form of social distancing would continue even as classmates and friends reunite.

"We'll no longer put our arms around each other's shoulders," he said. The long absence from classrooms has added to the pressure on final-year students preparing for the high-stakes "gaokao"

exams, which is the only route to Chinese universities and notoriously difficult. "At school there's a certain atmosphere for learning and at home there is not," said Wang Yuchen, a 17-year-old student. China said in March that it would postpone the exams by one month to July this year. — AFP

Yemen: Five years of devastating conflict

SANAA: Impoverished Yemen is mired in a devastating conflict between Iran-backed rebels and government forces that intensified after Saudi Arabia spearheaded a military intervention five years ago. Separatists further complicated the crisis on Sunday by declaring self-rule for the country's south. Here is an overview:

Saudi-led intervention

In September 2014, Houthi rebels from the country's Zaidi Shiite minority in northern Yemen enter Sanaa, seizing the government headquarters. Backed by Shiite-majority Iran, the rebels ally themselves with military units loyal to ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was forced to quit after a 2011 uprising. As well as the capital, they seize swathes of territory, including the Red Sea port of Hodeida, a crucial entry point for imports and humanitarian aid. In February 2015, President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi flees to second city Aden.

A coalition led by Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia, the bitter regional rival of Iran, enters the conflict on March 26, 2015 with air strikes on the rebels. Washington says it is contributing logistics and intelligence. As the rebels advance on Aden, Hadi flees, taking refuge in Saudi Arabia. The coalition's intervention helps pro-government forces to secure the southern port city and in October they announce they have retaken control of the Bab Al-Mandab strait, a key waterway for international shipping.

Battle for aid port

In June 2018, government fighters, backed by Saudi and Emirati ground forces, launch an offensive to retake the port city of Hodeida. UN-brokered talks between the warring parties open in December, yielding a series of breakthroughs including a ceasefire in Hodeida where fighting largely stops.

Southern separatists

The anti-Houthi camp is divided, with fighting breaking out repeatedly between southern separatists and unionist forces loyal to Hadi's government. In January 2018, the separatists occupy the presidential palace in Aden, before Saudi and Emirati forces intervene. South Yemen was an independent state until unifying with the north in 1990, and separatists remain powerful. In August 2019, separatists in Aden from the UAE-trained Security Belt force clash with unionist troops backed by Riyadh. In November, a power-sharing accord is signed between the two parties, but is never implemented. On April 26, 2020, the separatists declare self-governance for the south, and the accord with the government crumbles.

New escalation

On January 18, a missile strike on a loyalist military camp blamed on the Houthi kills 116 people and injures dozens. In early March, the rebels seize key provincial capital Al-Hazm after heavy fighting with government troops. On April 8, the Saudi-led coalition declares a two-week coronavirus ceasefire. A few hours into the ceasefire, which begins the following day, Houthi rebels dismiss the initiative as political maneuvering. Yemeni pro-government forces and Houthi rebels report several air raids in the northern districts of Al-Jawf and Hajjah. — AFP

India's rural poor lose out as drones map village land

BANGKOK: A government plan to map residential areas in rural India and issue title deeds could benefit hundreds of millions of people, but exclude lower-caste communities and those traditionally denied land, human rights experts said yesterday. Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week unveiled Swamitva Yojana, or Ownership Scheme, to map rural residential land for the first time in many Indian states, using drones and other technologies.

The program will be piloted in six states, and the titles can be used as collateral for loans, the prime minister said. It will also generate more revenue for states, which can be used to fund infrastructure and other public facilities. "Most residential properties in rural areas don't have proper ownership documents, and only providing people with a title deed can change that," Modi said in a video address. While India's agricultural land was surveyed in the British colonial period, areas where homes were built in villages - known as abadi land and measuring no more than 0.5 sq km - were considered as wasteland and rarely surveyed.

As India's population expanded and pressure on



SILIGURI: Laborers pluck tea leaves after the government eased a nationwide lockdown imposed as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus at Kiranchandra Tea Garden, some 20 kms from Siliguri. — AFP

land grew for farming and for building roads and airports, disputes over land ownership have increased, with about two-thirds of civil court cases related to land and property, according to researchers. A federal land record modernization program launched in 2008 seeks to re-survey all lands, verify and upgrade records, and put all the information online by 2021. Authorities have said this will help monitor land sales better, increase tax revenue and reduce corruption. Some states, including Maharashtra and Odisha, had also launched surveys of rural, residential land.

Train likely belonging to North Korea's Kim seen at resort town

SEOUL: A train likely belonging to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been spotted at a resort town in the country's east, satellite photos reviewed by a US-based think tank showed, as speculation persists over his health. The train was parked at a station reserved for the Kim family in Wonsan on April 21 and April 23, the respected 38North website said in a report published Saturday. 38North cautioned that the train's presence "does not prove the whereabouts of the North Korean leader or indicate anything about his health". "But it does lend weight to reports that Kim is staying at an elite area on the country's eastern coast," it said.

There has been growing conjecture about Kim's health since his conspicuous absence from the April 15 celebrations for the birthday of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, the regime's founder - the most important day on the North Korean political calendar. Kim has not made a public appearance since presiding over a meeting of the Workers' Party politburo on April 11 and inspecting drills by fighter jets at an air defense unit, which was reported by state media on April 12.

Out of sight

Daily NK, an online media outlet run mostly by North Korean defectors, has reported Kim underwent a cardiovascular procedure earlier this month and was recovering at a villa in North Pyongan province. Citing an unidentified source inside the country, it said Kim, who is in his mid-30s, had needed urgent treatment due to heavy smoking, obesity and fatigue.

South Korea, which is still technically at war with the North, has played down the report. CNN, quoting what it said was an anonymous US official, reported that Washington was "monitoring intelligence" that Kim was in "grave danger" after undergoing surgery. But on Thursday, US President Donald Trump rejected reports that Kim was ailing. "I think the report was incorrect," Trump told reporters, but declined to state when



WONSAN: This satellite image shows the resort town of Wonsan. A train likely belonging to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been spotted at a resort town in the country's east. — AFP

he was last in touch with him. "We have a good relationship with North Korea, as good as you can have," he said.

Trump has met Kim three times in historic summitry and has voiced admiration for him, although hopes have dimmed for reaching a comprehensive agreement. Reporting from inside the isolated North is notoriously difficult, especially on anything to do with its leadership, which is among its most closely guarded secrets. On Thursday, citing an unidentified government official, South Korean broadcaster SBS reported that Kim appeared to have been in Wonsan for at least the past four days and would soon return to the public eye.

The report added that the military was monitoring Kim's train, which had been seen in Wonsan, while his personal jet - frequently used by Kim on his trips to Wonsan - remained in Pyongyang. Previous absences from the public eye as Kim's part have prompted speculation about his health. In 2014 he dropped out of sight for nearly six weeks before reappearing with a cane. Days later, the South's spy agency said he had undergone surgery to remove a cyst from his ankle. — AFP

No access

Digitisation of records could exclude lower-caste communities who have traditionally been denied land, and make them more vulnerable to evictions, land experts said. "Property disputes in villages arise mainly as a result of manipulation of land records by officials. Also, when land holdings are not properly surveyed," said EAS Sarma, a land activist and former government official.

"Digitisation has worsened the situation because it has reduced transparency for small farmers who find it difficult to access digital records," he said. Surveys of land must be conducted transparently, and records reviewed by all residents, Sarma said, otherwise disputes will persist and influential people will continue to gain at the expense of the marginalized.

The Swamitva Yojana also does not specify whether titles will be given jointly to women, and if customary titles that do not have a written record - such as those held by indigenous people - will be recognized, said Namita Wahi, a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research think tank in Delhi. "The absence of recognition of customary titles, especially over village commons, may create further opportunities for land grabs of common lands, which is one of the biggest causes of land conflict in India," she said. "Minus a proactive attempt to include Dalits, Adivasis (indigenous people) and women, there is a real danger of them being excluded," she said. — Reuters

Million Australians download COVID-19 tracker app

SYDNEY: More than one million Australians have downloaded a new government smartphone app designed to make coronavirus contact tracing easier despite concerns about how authorities might use their data. Health minister Greg Hunt hailed take-up since the app was released Sunday evening as "extraordinary", adding that 1.1 million people had downloaded the program by yesterday morning.

The nation of 25 million people has uncovered just over 6,700 instances of COVID-19, with the rate of new cases falling to 10-20 per day despite widespread testing. Experts have heralded the "COVIDSafe" app as a way of improving authorities' ability to track new outbreaks of the disease. The app works by using smartphones' Bluetooth function to detect other users nearby. If a user tests positive, anyone who has been in close proximity can then be notified, making rapid tracking of the disease much easier.

The system is seen as a key stepping stone to removing social distancing restrictions that have shuttered bars, restaurants, offices and most classrooms for the last month. Hunt and others were at pains to stress the app is not a location tracker and that only state health authorities will use the data. There has been widespread concern about what Australia's conservative government - which has a record of pushing the boundaries of civil rights protections - would do with the data.

"This is simply about helping us find and alert anybody who may have been exposed to the virus," Hunt told Sky News. "It means that they can be diagnosed and protected earlier, and it can protect our nurses and our doctors, our seniors and our vulnerable Australians." Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy has said a "good take-up" would be just over 50 percent of the population. The early figure is around four percent and rising. The app's release comes as some Australian states with zero new coronavirus cases tentatively announced an easing of stay-at-home restrictions. In Queensland, family picnics and weekend drives within a short distance of home will soon be permitted. — AFP

Business

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11 Ghostly airports: Air travel in the time of the virus



NEW YORK: Clouds move over an almost-deserted Times Square in the early morning hours of Friday in New York City. Job losses from the coronavirus pandemic deepened last week with data showing another 4.4 million US workers filed new claims for jobless benefits, bringing the total to 26.4 million since mid-March. — AFP

US economy faces historic shock

Trump advisor says 16% joblessness possible

WASHINGTON: The shuttering of the US economy due to the coronavirus pandemic is a shock of historic proportions that will likely push the national unemployment rate to 16 percent or higher this month and require more stimulus to ensure a strong rebound, a White House economic adviser said on Sunday. "It's a really grave situation," President Donald Trump's adviser, Kevin Hassett, told the ABC program "This Week."

"This is the biggest negative shock that our economy, I think, has ever seen. We're going to be looking at an unemployment rate that approaches rates that we saw during the Great Depression" of the 1930s, Hassett added. Lockdowns across the United States to curtail the spread of the novel coronavirus have hammered the economy, shuttering businesses and sending unemployment skyrocketing.

A record 26.5 million Americans have filed for jobless benefits since mid-March, and retail sales, homebuilding and consumer confidence have all cratered. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office predicts US gross domestic product will contract at nearly a 40 percent annual rate in the second quarter, with unemployment cresting at 16 percent in the third quarter. But even next year, the CBO sees the jobless rate still averaging above 10 percent. Before the pandemic struck, the US jobless rate had

been hovering at a 50-year low of 3.5 percent.

"I think the unemployment rate is going to jump to a level probably around 16 percent or even higher in the next jobs report," due on May 8, providing April employment statistics, Hassett told reporters at the White House. Hassett added that the second-quarter drop expected in the nation's GDP would



**26.5million
Americans
claim jobless
benefits**

be a "big number."

"I think the next couple of months are going to look terrible. You're going to see numbers as bad as anything we've ever seen before," Hassett said, referring to US economic data.

"We're going to need really big thoughtful policies to put together to make it so that people are

optimistic again," Hassett added. Trump's advisers want to hone a list of five or six ideas to present to Congress to help clear the economic carnage, Hassett said. "I'm sure that over the next three or four weeks, everybody's going to pull together and come up with a plan to give us the best chance possible for a V-shaped recovery," Hassett told ABC. "I ... don't think you get it if we don't have another round of really solid legislation." A "V-shaped recovery" is one in which an economy bounces back sharply after a precipitous decline.

Tensions on Capitol Hill

The US Congress has already approved \$3 trillion in coronavirus relief in a show of bipartisan support for laid-off workers and an economy in free fall. Lawmakers are now poised for a battle over federal assistance to state and local governments whose budgets have been shattered by a plunge in tax revenue even as they have had to take extraordinary measures during a pandemic that has caused a US death toll approaching 55,000. New York City needs \$7.4 billion in federal aid to offset economic losses from the coronavirus, its mayor said on Sunday. "If New York City is not (made) whole, it will drag down the entire region, and it will hold up the entire national economic restart," Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat,

said on the Fox program "Sunday Morning Futures." Like de Blasio, many of the nation's governors - Democrats and Republicans alike - have pressed the Trump administration and Congress to come forward with a sizable relief package. "We will have state and local (aid), and we will have it in a very significant way," House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the top Democrat in Congress, said on CNN's "State of the Union." "The governors are impatient," Pelosi added. "Their impatience will help us get an even bigger number."

Trump has shown a willingness to support aid for cities and states, but some fellow Republicans - including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell - have voiced wariness, citing a mounting federal debt load. McConnell, in remarks that have drawn sharp rebukes from various governors as well as Democratic lawmakers, has suggested that states should declare bankruptcy instead.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, asked whether Trump would support providing hundreds of billions of dollars to the states, said any further relief would have to receive support from both parties. "This is a war. We'll win this war. If we need to spend more money, we will, and we'll only do it with bipartisan support," Mnuchin told "Fox News Sunday." — Reuters

US oil slides below \$15 on storage worries

SINGAPORE: US oil prices fell heavily yesterday and slipped below \$15 a barrel on renewed storage concerns as the coronavirus throttles demand, even as producers start slashing output to boost markets. American benchmark West Texas Intermediate dropped 15 percent to \$14.39 a barrel in Asian afternoon trade, reversing direction after several days of gains last week.

Brent crude, the international benchmark, was off nearly six percent at \$20.16 a barrel. Oil prices have collapsed in recent weeks as demand evaporated because of lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed worldwide to fight the virus. Last week, US oil fell below zero for the first time as investors scrambled to offload it before the expiry of a trading contract, but could not readily find buyers.

Prices have recovered since, but remain at their lowest levels for years. A key worry for traders is that storage facilities - particularly in the United States - cannot cope with the oversupply. "Concerns surrounding rising global inventories, especially in the US with the coronavirus pandemic weighing on gasoline consumption, are pressuring oil prices," said Kim Kwangrae, a commodities analyst at Samsung Futures Inc.

The oversupply could test storage capacity limits in three to



A view of the Marathon Petroleum Corp's Los Angeles Refinery in Carson. — AFP

four weeks as tanks fill up, Goldman Sachs warned in a report. The continued concerns about storage overshadowed signs that some countries - including Kuwait and Algeria - are starting to slash production in line with a major agreement hammered out this month.

Top producers have agreed to reduce output by 10 million barrels a day from May to shore up markets, a deal that marked an end to a price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia. — AFP

Egypt seeks aid from IMF amid virus-hit downturn

CAIRO: Egypt is seeking an aid package from the International Monetary Fund to offset the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli said Sunday.

In a televised press conference with the central bank governor and other ministers, Madbouli did not specify the size of the one-year financial aid package the government was seeking from the IMF alongside technical assistance. He said the loan would be negotiated "within days".

In a statement Sunday, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said Egypt's request would be presented to the Fund's executive board "within the next few weeks".

But she struck a clearly supportive tone, saying Cairo had "responded quickly and decisively" to limit the spread of the virus and support affected people and businesses. Georgieva added that "the Central Bank of Egypt has also implemented timely measures to support the domestic economy."

Madbouli, while touting the North African economy's strong performance before the outbreak, said the aid package was crucial, given that flights are grounded and tourism halted. "No one knows when this crisis will end, so we wanted to take some measures that would build on the economy's gains, especially after the complete shutdown of the aviation and tourism sectors," he said.

Egypt's tourism sector earned \$12.6 billion in 2019, the highest figure in nearly a decade. But the impact of coronavirus has been severe. — AFP

Business

Bank of Japan expands easing measures, cuts growth forecast

Japan economy grapples with fallout from pandemic

TOKYO: The Bank of Japan yesterday ramped up its emergency monetary easing and cut growth forecasts for the world's third largest economy, as the coronavirus pandemic ravages the globe.

After a meeting shortened from two days to one, the central bank said it would shift to unlimited government bond buying and more than double its capacity to purchase corporate bonds and commercial papers—a move to support Japan Inc's financing as the country grapples with fallout from the virus. The announcement comes as central banks around the world revert to extraordinary measures-in hand with trillions of dollars of government stimulus—to support their economies, which have been ravaged by long-running lockdowns aimed at preventing the spread of the disease.

Analysts said the announcement was appropriate but were gloomy on the prospects of success.

The move is “largely symbolic, but it's better than doing nothing”, Taro Saito, senior economist at NLI Research Institute, told AFP ahead of the decision. “Given the circumstances, no one expects the latest policy can turn the economy around, and the same can be said about fiscal stimulus,” he said.

Even before lifting the 80 trillion yen cap on government bond buying, the BoJ's purchases were well below the ceiling, Saito noted. In a quarterly economic report issued yesterday, the bank also revised down growth forecasts for the world's third largest economy. For the current fiscal year to March 2021, it now forecasts the economy will shrink 3.0-5.0 percent, compared with the previous

estimate of 0.8-1.1 percent growth.

For the past year to last month, the BoJ estimates the economy shrank 0.1 percent to 0.4 percent, compared with the previously estimated 0.8-0.9 percent growth. However, it revised up the forecast for fiscal year to March 2022, now estimating growth of 2.8-3.9 percent, against a previous estimate of 1.0-1.3 percent expansion.

'Increasingly severe situation'

“Japan's economy has been in an increasingly severe situation due to the impact of the spread of the novel coronavirus at home and abroad,” the bank said in a statement. “Financial conditions have been less accommodative in terms of corporate financing, as seen in deterioration in firms' financial positions,” it added.

It said its “current powerful monetary easing measures... will contribute to supporting economic and financial activities”, along with measures taken by governments at home and abroad to tackle the pandemic. The central bank left rates unchanged and also reiterated its longstanding commitment to a two percent inflation target, which has remained stubbornly elusive.

But it revised down its forecast for core consumer prices, which exclude fresh food, now estimating the fiscal year to March 2021 will see the prices falling between 0.3 percent and 0.7 percent on-year, against rises of 1.0-1.1 percent in the previous estimate. The central bank's decisions come ahead of the US Federal Reserve's meeting later this week to shore up confidence and keep the financial



TOKYO: The Bank of Japan said it would shift to unlimited government bond buying and more than double its capacity to purchase corporate bonds and commercial papers—a move to support Japan Inc's financing as the country grapples with fallout from the virus. — AFP

sector running. The Fed has already unveiled measures to bolster liquidity and cut interest rates to historic near-zero as the coronavirus slammed the US economy, so it is not expected to do much besides project confidence at its policy meeting this week, analysts have said. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government last month unveiled a package of stimulus measures worth around \$1 trillion to protect jobs, bolster the medical sector and ease the pain for working families. Earlier this month, Abe said the

government will offer a cash payment of 100,000 yen (\$930) to every resident.

“Japan's economy is likely to remain in a severe situation for the time being due to the impact of” the virus, the BoJ said in its quarterly report. But “thereafter, as the impact of the spread of the COVID-19 wanes at home and abroad, Japan's economy is likely to improve, supported by accommodative financial conditions and the government's economic measures”, it added. — AFP

Jetmaker Embraer scrambles for elusive plan B

SAO PAULO/PARIS: Brazilian planemaker Embraer SA has been thrust into an uncertain future with no immediate plan B, while not ruling out seeking a bailout after Boeing Co jettisoned a \$4.2 billion commercial aerospace tie-up amid the coronavirus crisis.

The company's shell-shocked chief executive, in the job for a year with little aerospace experience, sought to rally staff after the board held late-night talks to review the collapse of plans for surviving mounting aerospace competition. “Our history is full of difficult moments, and we have overcome all of them,” Francisco Gomes Neto told Embraer's 20,000 staff before giving them a thumbs up.

But Embraer now faces a historic crisis with its isolation reinforced by the breakup - two years after Europe's Airbus absorbed Embraer's main competitor, the Canadian-designed A220.

“For Embraer, it could be very damaging,” said Teal Group consultant Richard Aboulafia, noting it was the only significant independent jetmaker. “It's hard to pressure your suppliers when the volume you're offering is a fraction of your competition's”. Embraer's immediate aim is to reassure investors. It pledged cost savings and said it had solid liquidity.

It also tore up arguments previously used to persuade unions and regulators to back the deal, saying it could survive without Boeing rather than stating the deal would be its “salvation”. The former state-owned company has not asked for a bailout but says it is open to “complementary” sources of financing.

Brazilian companies, including airlines and automakers, are in bailout discussions. Embraer “will need strong government support to recover the (separation) expenses and recover from the economic crisis caused by coronavirus,” said Aurelio Valporto, who heads minority shareholder group Abradin and opposed the deal.

Embraer had two main pitches for investors that have now vanished. First, it would pay \$1.6 billion in dividends from the sale. Second, it would receive enough cash to wipe debts clean and rejuvenate defense and executive-jet units. As a revamped company, Embraer would get a fresh start.

Executives also hoped Boeing's marketing would be a silver bullet for the commercial arm, to be 80%-owned by Boeing. Instead, Embraer now has a crisis committee that meets daily and no end in sight for its troubles. That, analysts say, could not come at a worse time. Sales of its E2 have lagged. Overall jet demand has vanished due to coronavirus. Now, crashing oil prices have further weakened the case for new jets, sold mainly on fuel efficiency.

Questions have also been raised over how long high-profile Embraer jetliner CEO John Slattery, who aggressively marketed the E2 jet while lobbying for regulatory approval, will stay without the deal. He did not respond to a request to comment. In a Twitter post, he said, “Despite this uncertain period in our industry, I'm confident Embraer will emerge stronger.” — Reuters

Special Report

Prep recovery for post-oil COVID-19 squeeze

By Chris Wood

Let's use today's financial squeeze as a springboard for more resilient and focused growth. Yes, that's an optimistic approach, but is there any other choice for energy markets right now? We are entering the worst economic blow since the Great Depression in the 1930s.

There isn't much breathing room between the demand destruction wreaked by COVID-19 - sadly, taking more than 200,000 lives so far - and the tsunami of global oversupply depressing oil



All eyes on ECB for further moves on virus-fighting

FRANKFURT: The European Central Bank has launched a series of never-before-seen measures to cushion the economic blow from the coronavirus pandemic but it looks set to reaffirm Thursday it will do more still, even if some of the options appear limited. Here is what the ECB has done so far and what could be coming next:

Big-bang bond buys

On March 18, financial market panic pushed central bank chiefs into announcing a mammoth 750-billion-euro (\$810 billion) bond-buying program without waiting for a regular monetary policy meeting. Coming on top of an existing “quantitative easing” (QE) scheme, the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP) will buy up government and corporate debt worth around 1.1 trillion euros this year so as to flood the system with cheap money. The ECB decided not to retain its self-imposed limits on how much of each country's debt it can buy for PEPP, allowing it to focus purchases on the worst-hit economies such as Italy. ECB head Christine Lagarde has also announced massive new rounds of cheap lending to banks beginning in June.

The ECB last week said it would accept bonds as collateral for that lending scheme even if private-sector credit rating agencies downgrade them to so-called “junk” status which would normally bar such a move.

More purchases?

But “the ECB could well be forced soon to pull another trick out of its hat in an effort to impress markets and calm growing debt sustainability concerns,” Allianz chief economist Ludovic Subran said.

Germany, Italy, France and Spain among the 19-nation eurozone must issue more than one trillion euros of debt to bolster their promised safety nets against mass bankruptcies in their shutdown economies. Thursday could also bring a discussion

prices. For one, US oil plummeted below zero on 21st April - for the first time in history. Never before has the marine fuels supply chain - refineries, ports, storage operators, shipping companies et al - faced such a powerful pressure cooker. We are in entirely uncharted waters. But that doesn't mean business stops. It just needs to be more determined, more collaborative and learn from each other.

Green shoots ahoy

Strong demand is emerging in both the UAE's Port of Fujairah and across Asia, thanks to the returning appetite of China, the world's biggest oil importer. We've just reported a record high quarterly shipment volume of 1.3mn metric tons of ultra-low sulfur fuel oil (ULSFO) across Fujairah, the world's second largest bunkering hub, and Singapore, the world's biggest. This isn't to say all is well in the industry, but they are encouraging signs.

In one sense, timing has been fortuitous. The industry would probably not have been as well placed to deal with today's crisis without the start of IMO 2020 on 1st January. Firms have spent the last eighteen months improving the efficiency of their balance sheets in order to cope with the higher fuel prices that were anticipated once lower sulfur fuel oil became compulsory this year in one of the biggest changes in marine fuels since the early 1900s. Yet instead, fuel prices have fallen from \$700/mt in



FRANKFURT: People wearing face masks walk in front of a big Euro sign in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany, as the European Central Bank (ECB) headquarter can be seen in the background on Friday amid the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

among governors on extending PEPP to restore confidence, Capital Economics analysts suggested.

That could include allowing the ECB to buy “junk”-rated debt under its QE programmes, something that it has ruled out until now.

Blue-sky thinking

Since 2012, a crucial arrow has sat unused in the ECB's quiver-the so-called “OMT” or Outright Monetary Transactions programme that provides in a crisis for unlimited purchases of debt from a specific country. Normally the nation concerned would first have to accept an aid programme from the EU's bailout fund, the European Stability Mechanism, whose conditions of harsh economic reforms make it politically toxic for leaders in Rome and elsewhere.

There has been much discussion recently over using ESM funds but not insisting on the reform conditions. Meanwhile European treaties forbid so-called “primary market” purchases of debt directly as governments issue it, Lagarde recently recalled.

A more classic monetary policy lever could see the ECB lower the interest rate on banks' deposits in Frankfurt from its present minus 0.5 percent, to encourage lending. But financial firms have long complained of the burden placed on their shoulders by negative interest rates. Lagarde warned national leaders last week of the danger of doing “too little, too late” as the European Union faces the prospect of the worst recession since its beginnings in the post-World War II period. — AFP

January to \$240/mt today - a 65% decline that provides relief to many stakeholders who now find themselves in an unexpected economic battle. Cash reserves will be especially valuable as demand inevitably picks up and those with deep pockets are the most agile and able to lock in market share.

Realistic goals

Real recovery is unlikely gain any significant momentum before 2021, for economic uncertainty remains rampant. Some countries are still at the peak of their demand destruction amid COVID-19 and others may still be affected, i.e. African nations, collectively home to 1.2bn people. It took years for the world to regain its financial footing after the global recession of 2008 and today's crisis is far more unpredictable. We only need to walk into our local shop to see how the global supply chain and the energy industry facilitating it are suffering: empty shelves and reduced stock abound. Some solutions to accelerating the recovery may not be popular. The money that governments worldwide are providing in huge stimulus packages must come from somewhere. Amid the uncertainty, one point is clear. Patience will be vital in ensuring we have a steady and sustainable recovery; think rabbit versus the hare. For now, find your 'springboard' for recovery and get as much lift as possible.

Note: Chris Wood, Managing Director is Uniper Energy DMCC

EMEA tracks Asia higher as stimulus steps boost mood

SINGAPORE: Emerging markets in Europe, the Middle East and Africa edged up yesterday, tracking their Asian peers higher after more stimulus measures in the developed world prompted some buying into riskier assets.

Most stocks and currencies still stuck to the tight intraday ranges seen over the past few weeks, as markets looked for tangible signs of progress against the coronavirus outbreak. The MSCI's index of emerging market stocks has stayed in a range of 880 to 900 for nearly three weeks, with trade mostly taking place in reaction to news on the virus. The index rose about 1.6 percent on the day, bolstered by the Bank of Japan pledging to buy unlimited bonds, while markets bet on further measures from other major economies. The U.S. Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank are set to meet later in the week.

Emerging market stocks have fared far better than currencies, given that safe-haven demand for the U.S. dollar prompted vast outflows from the foreign exchange space. Interest rate cuts by central banks have also made their currencies less attractive. “There is a limit to what central banks can do. Economic downturns are normally caused by imbalances, and central banks help to resolve those imbalances,” Paul Donovan, Chief Economist of UBS Global Wealth Management, said.

“This is not the case today. The downturn is policy-driven, and central bank policy plays a very junior role to fiscal policy.” The MSCI's index of developing world currencies rose slightly for the day, but was barely above lows hit during the initial rout caused by the pandemic.

Central European currencies, such as the Hungarian forint edged up against the dollar, as did the Swedish krona. Markets are holding out for euro zone economies to deliver a joint rescue package for countries hit by the virus. — Reuters

Business

stc welcomes Ramadan with its ‘Ramadan Lives On’ campaign

A dedication to the people of Kuwait during the blessed holy month

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, launched its “Ramadan Lives On” campaign with a dedication to the people of Kuwait and the Arab world, wishing a blessed and fulfilling Holy Month of Ramadan.



2020 Ramadan ad generates 4m views on first day

In a statement released by the Company, stc announced that it released a Ramadan advertisement carrying the same name as its campaign, noting that the production received positive feedback from the public, generating over 4 million views on its first day.

This campaign comes within the framework of stc's corporate social responsibility strategy focusing on

supporting the local community and Arab World during these difficult times. Despite the current conditions and enforcement of social distancing, stc stands by its commitment, especially during the Holy Month, to continue providing its customers with uninterrupted services, allowing them to connect with their loved ones through stc's advanced digital channels and solutions.

In her role, Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, said, “We are pleased with the public's reception and feedback regarding our 2020 Ramadan advertisement, “Ramadan Lives On”. The video exceeded 4 million views in one day after it was uploaded on stc's digital platforms, reflecting the originality of the concept and quality of the production, which was positively received by the audience.”

Explaining the concept, Al-Jasem said, “We focused on portraying what the world is currently going through while touching on the importance of staying connected with your loved ones. Even though worldwide lockdowns and curfews have emptied streets, closed businesses, and triggered economic slowdowns, Ramadan lives on in our hearts and continues to be filled with life. The Holy Month reminds us of the strength of our faith and will power to adjust and overcome obstacles that arise in our paths. The annual tra-



Danah Al-Jasem

diting us a step closer towards overcoming this pandemic together.”

Al-Jasem added, “As part of our social responsibility agenda, we launched a series of activities and CSR initiatives under the umbrella of our “Ramadan Live On” campaign. The activities aim to support the people of Kuwait in facing the current conditions that are in effect due to the pandemic. The campaign comes as a segment of stc's commitment towards supporting the

local community and economy.”

Al-Jasem concluded, “Since the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in Kuwait, stc has worked diligently to assist the government's efforts in responding and containing the spread of infection. In our most recent initiative, stc utilized its resources to accommodate returning citizens to their beloved country, as well as back the preventative measures the country has set in place to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The Company also distributed 25,000 free prepaid lines to travelers arriving back to Kuwait in cooperation with Kuwait Airways and the Ministry of Health. The purpose of distributing the prepaid lines was to ensure that returning citizens had a channel to communicate with their loved ones at no cost during the mandatory isolation period.

To better serve its customers, stc upgraded its digital channels to offer the Company's array of products and services to new and existing customers from the comfort of their homes. stc's online platforms also allow customers to seamlessly execute transactions related to their accounts online and hassle free. With the upgrade came a series of online exclusive offers to enrich the customers' experience at home, whether it be online gaming, working remotely from home or enjoying services to fulfill their entertainment needs.

Ooredoo launches Ramadan campaign

KUWAIT: Under the theme “In a time when we can't be together, at least we can still be close”, Ooredoo Group has launched its much-awaited annual Ramadan campaign with a short video highlighting how people can still connect despite the ongoing global pandemic.

This year's Ramadan campaign was designed to showcase the power of technology in enabling families, friends and communities around the world to overcome the current disruptions to a traditional Holy Month and build stronger ties with loved ones. For the first time in the region, Ooredoo's Ramadan campaign was shot completely using only smartphones, with people performing and sharing their scenes from their own homes. Ooredoo teams around the world leveraged the power of the company's networks to be able to work closely together remotely and help film the campaign's short video in 11 different countries, including Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Maldives, Palestine, Algeria, Tunisia, USA, France and South Africa.

The Holy Month of Ramadan will be very different to many this year. Unlike other years, society will have to experience this blessed month away from many of their loved ones. But although apart, people won't have to feel alone as Ooredoo delivers on its promise to enable all the communities which it serves to stay connected and enjoy the internet, while staying safe. During the Holy Month of Ramadan, Ooredoo is encouraging people to maintain social distancing and make use of group chats and video calling to keep in touch at this challenging time. With Ooredoo's advanced networks, families and communities can stay connected, productive, entertained and most importantly close at a time when the global pandemic is often preventing them from being together.



The company is currently playing a key role in supporting customers across its global footprint with both digital solutions and relief measures. Ooredoo has significantly optimized network performance and enhanced internet speeds, enabling social distancing, seamless home schooling and access to home entertainment. The Company is conscious about its huge responsibility as a telecommunications company to help minimise the spread of COVID-19 by giving easy and affordable access to technology wherever it operates, even in the most remote areas. During this time, especially during the Holy Month of Ramadan, Ooredoo is here when its customers need it most, and is encouraging customers to stay at home with Ooredoo and enjoy the internet.”

Also, Ooredoo's agile contribution to business continuity with a range of secure and immersive digital solutions will help ensure people have something to go back to once the current situation is resolved.

lions of dollars that's making its way into the economy, and I think this is going to have a significant impact.” Congress this week passed a new \$483 billion economic relief bill, adding to the massive \$2.2 trillion emergency package passed in mid-March.

Another big package, this one for struggling state and local governments, is under discussion.

But resistance to more spending appears to be growing among some Republicans, exemplified by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's suggestion this week that it would be preferable for states to file for bankruptcy.

McConnell's comments were angrily denounced by Democratic and some Republican governors, and have so far not been echoed by the White House. “As I've said, this is a war. We'll win this war,” Mnuchin said. “If we need to spend more money we will, and we'll only do it with bipartisan support.”

The secretary brushed off concerns that the national debt is expected to exceed GDP this year.

“We're going to need to look at, over time, how we deal with that issue,” he said. “But right now we're in a war and we have to protect American workers and American business. And we're going to do whatever we need to take to do that.” White House economic adviser Kevin Hassett, however, warned in a separate television appearance that the impact of the pandemic has been so severe, with some 26 million people filing for unemployment benefits so far, that it could have long-term effects.

‘Grave situation’

“Make no mistake, it's a really grave situation,” he said on ABC's “This Week.” “This is the biggest negative shock that our economy, I think, has ever seen. We're going to be looking at an unemployment rate that approaches rates that we saw during the Great Depression.”

Hassett said debt levels have reached a point where “it can be a long-term negative for growth,” and should be dealt with along with short-term stimulus in the next phase of legislative action.

“Again, you have to understand that this is an unprecedented shock to the economy, that we're going to be looking at second-quarter negative GDP growth that's probably north of minus 15, minus 20 percent. “It's the biggest negative shock that we've seen since the Second World War, and with that kind of emergency, the good news is we've got this bipartisan action, this build-a-bridge-to-the-other-side, but there's still going to be a heck of a lot of other problems that pop up.” — AFP



In this file photo, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin speaks during the daily briefing on the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, in the Brady Briefing Room of the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

Ghostly airports: Air travel in the time of the virus

NEW YORK: Ghostly airports, countless flight cancellations, shops and restaurants closed: the coronavirus has played havoc with air travel in the United States.

Following are some scenes witnessed by AFP journalists during the unusual experience of flying from South Dakota to Washington in the time of the pandemic. Denver, canceled. Phoenix, likewise. A single plane is taking off this Saturday from the small airport in Rapid City, South Dakota, headed for Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the Rapid City airport, every shop is closed. A gray-haired maintenance worker, not wearing a mask, carefully disinfects the handrail of an escalator in the near-empty terminal.

But there is one upside to the grim situation: For once, there is no line to get through the security check. “Can you take your mask off?” a security officer politely asks. She needs to compare a traveler's face to his photo ID.

Signs posted all around the boarding gates ask “What is social distancing?” The reminder is not necessarily overkill in a state that is one of the very few not to have placed its residents under lockdown during the pandemic. The few people traveling are polite and disciplined, maintaining appropriate distance between one another before boarding. Some even wear masks—a rarity in this part of the country.

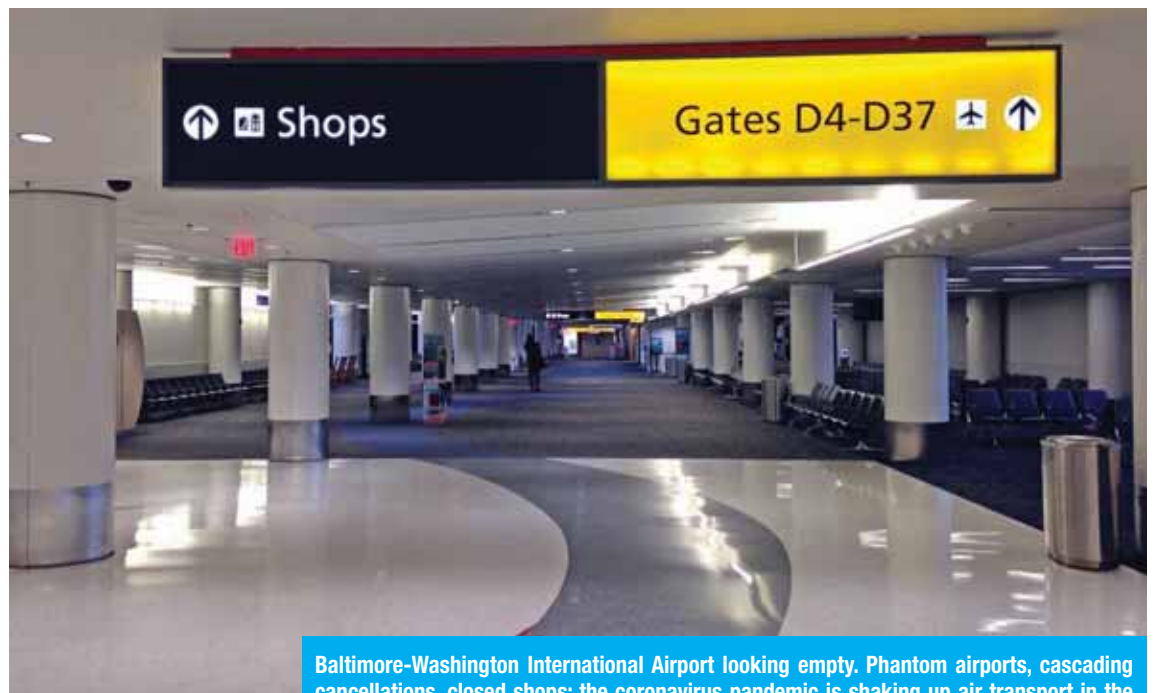
Since Delta Air Lines had canceled two flights the

No on-board service

“We do not offer service on board,” a flight attendant, wearing gloves but no mask, announces apologetically, as she passes out plastic bags containing snacks, bottles of water and disinfecting wipes. She moves up and down the aisle frequently with a trash bag to be sure no one leaves any waste in the seatback pouches.

The AFP team has a brief layover in Minneapolis, where most shops and restaurants are closed. In this major regional hub, normally full of life, an almost oppressive silence reigns, broken only by the regular pleas on the public-address system for people to take proper protective measures.

As the travelers prepare for takeoff on another Delta flight bound for Baltimore-Washington International airport, a video is shown for passengers with advice on anti-virus precautions-before the usual video explaining how to inflate a life jacket or find the exits in the event of a water landing. In this plane, much larger than the first one, each person enjoys an entire row of three seats-almost like flying in first class, only without the Champagne. Upon our arrival at BWI airport, people jump up from their seats, not really respecting any sort of social distance. Bad habits, it seems, are not so easily forgotten. — AFP



Baltimore-Washington International Airport looking empty. Phantom airports, cascading cancellations, closed shops: the coronavirus pandemic is shaking up air transport in the United States. — AFP

US renews waiver for Iraq to import Iranian electricity

WASHINGTON: The United States has renewed a waiver for Iraq to continue importing Iranian electricity, a State Department official said on Sunday, but this time for a shorter period of 30 days, adding that Washington would be reassessing whether to renew again once a “credible government” is formed in Iraq. “The Secretary granted this brief extension of the waiver to allow time for the formation of a credible government,” a State Department official said, referring to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and added that the waiver would expire on May 26.

Washington has repeatedly extended the exemption for Baghdad to use crucial Iranian energy supplies for its power grid, for periods of 90 or 120 days. The United States has insisted that oil-rich Iraq, OPEC's second-largest producer, move towards energy self-sufficiency as a condition for its exemption for importing Iranian energy.

Earlier this month, Iraq's president named intelligence chief Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as prime minister-designate, the third person tapped to lead Iraq in just

10 weeks as it struggles to replace a government that fell last year after months of deadly protests. “Once that government is in place, the Secretary will reassess whether to renew the waiver and for how long,” the State Department official said.

David Schenker, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Bureau at the State Department in a briefing earlier this month had praised Kadhimi's work as the head of intelligence.

Ties between Washington and Baghdad have been strained as the United States said it was disappointed that Iraqi forces have failed to protect the US forces stationed in Iraq. They have come under multiple rocket attacks this year alone, for which the United States blames the Iran-backed militia.

US-Iranian relations have been bitter since the Islamic Revolution toppled the US-backed Shah of Iran in 1979 and ushered in an era of theocratic rule. Tensions flared up after President Donald Trump pulled out the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and reimposed US sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy.

Worsening tensions, a Jan. 3 US drone strike in Iraq killed Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force. It also killed Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, who founded Iraq's Shi'ite Kataib Hezbollah militia after the 2003 US-led invasion.

The State Department official said the waiver granted by Pompeo applied only to electricity and referred to the Treasury Department for transactions related to Iranian natural gas imports. — Reuters

Arctic gas push threatens reindeer herders

YAMAL-NENETS, Russia: The flare stack at the Yarudeiskoye gas well burns brightly through the long Arctic night, lighting up the treeless tundra in northern Russia as compressors fill the air with an incessant whine. Indigenous Nenets reindeer herders say oil and gas operations in the Yamal region - exploration activity that includes hundreds of wells and dozens of trains and tankers - are polluting the environment and harming their animals' health.

But avoiding the gas fields in Yamal, 2,000 km (1,250 miles) northeast of Moscow, is becoming harder as fossil fuel infrastructure creeps across the region, spurred on by tax breaks passed in March as part of Russia's new Arctic development strategy.

At the same time, the strain on the Nenets' traditional livelihood is compounded by climate change, with extreme weather events and disease outbreaks killing tens of thousands of reindeer over the past few decades, the herders say. "If we don't convey to people that the earth is being destroyed, then indigenous peoples will be destroyed," herder and activist Yeiko Serotetto told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in his family's reindeer-hide tent.

"With such barbaric methods of conquering the Arctic, in 100 years (reindeer herding) won't exist."

Lichen under the ice

People in Yamal have been partially domesticating reindeer for hunting, transport, food, clothing and shelter for much of the past two millennia. Today, about 10,000 reindeer herders in Yamal - who make up one-fifth of Russia's Nenets population - migrate up to 800 miles (1,287 km) across the tundra in the course of each year.

They travel from the forest's northern edge to the Arctic coast, where summer winds give the reindeer a brief respite from mosquitoes and botflies as they build up fat.

With the Arctic warming more than twice as fast as the rest of the planet, according to the US National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, "rain-on-snow" events have become more common across the region. When temperatures fall below freezing after such rainstorms, they create a nearly impenetrable crust of ice over the lichen that reindeer rely on for

food over the winter.

Rain-on-snow events have worsened over the past 15 years, according to locals and Arctic experts. The biggest in recent years killed about 61,000 reindeer in the fall and winter of 2013-14.

Warming weather also led to a record heat wave in Yamal in 2016 that caused an anthrax outbreak, killing more than 2,650 reindeer and a 12-year-old Nenets boy. A state report said that unprecedented thawing of permafrost soil had unleashed anthrax spores that had been trapped in a frozen reindeer carcass for at least 75 years.

During a hot summer in 2018, the Serotetto family also lost nearly a third of its herd to necrobacillosis, a bacterial foot infection that a Norwegian study suggested is more active in warm, moist weather.

"(The herders) have never lacked the confidence in their skills to navigate what's happening, but right now they're getting worried," noted University of Lapland professor Bruce Forbes, an author of a study looking at changes in the region.

Gas expansion

Part of the threat to the Nenets way of life stems from the natural gas beneath their animals' hooves. Almost half of the European Union's growing gas imports came from Russia last year, much of them from Yamal, where the government claims to have more than a fifth of the world's reserves.

Last month, President Vladimir Putin signed an Arctic fossil fuel stimulus package that slashes taxes on new liquefied natural gas and gas chemical projects to 0 percent for the first 12 years.

Despite the plunge in energy prices amid the coronavirus outbreak, oil and gas projects are pushing ahead. Novatek and Gazprom, two of Russia's largest gas producers, already have several large operations in the area and both have publicly stated they will keep building new gas terminals, refineries, pipelines and fields through the pandemic.

The Yamal region uses revenues from energy to pay herders a monthly subsidy of 5,000 roubles (\$66), and oil and gas companies often give away snowmobiles to the top wrestlers and sleigh racers at the annual Reindeer Herders' Day celebrations.



Reindeer herder Yeiko Serotetto cuts frozen fish for breakfast at his family's camp in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region of Russia. — Reuters

But many locals and activists say that is not enough compensation for the environmental impact of massive hydrocarbon projects. A Russian state-funded study published last year found that concentrations of mercury were above safe levels in the soil at all 20 sites examined in central Yamal, linking the high levels to air pollution. The governor's office told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in a statement that Yamal residents are given the chance to have their say on hydrocarbon projects through letters and public hearings.

But Serotetto and other herders said they are not informed in time to come in from the tundra to attend the meetings.

Skinnier reindeer

Though the wellheads and pipelines take up a small percentage of the region's territory, scientists have said they have an outsized effect on pastoralism. Most herding routes up the Yamal peninsula have to cross a railway and various pipelines and roads, creating bottlenecks for migrating families and cutting off access to campsites and grazing areas.

Gas companies have raised some of their pipelines to allow reindeer to pass underneath and drillers lay tarpaulin across roads to help reindeer cross. Still, a 2007 Norwegian study has found that industrial disturbances can decrease reindeer reproduction and calf survival rates. — Reuters

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Lifestyle | Features

CANADIAN STARS JOIN IN CORONAVIRUS BROADCAST FUNDRAISER

Celine Dion, Justin Bieber and Margaret Atwood were among the Canadian celebrities who joined for a broadcast event Sunday to honor healthcare workers battling the coronavirus pandemic and raise money for food banks. The “Stronger Together/Tous Ensemble” event, which was broadcast on radio, television and streamed online, brought together Canadian personalities who sang or delivered messages of solidarity from their living rooms or — in the case of Dion — their kitchens. The Canadian singer paid tribute to those who work in health care or provide essential services despite the risks of contracting COVID-19. Her message to fellow citizens: “stay

healthy and as positive as possible.” “We will get through to the other side,” said award-winning novelist Atwood. “There is another side, and when we do get there we will be thinking of other and better ways to do things. I’ll see you on the other side.” Testimonies and messages of solidarity alternated with songs during the 90-minute show that had no commercial interruptions. Other celebrities that made an appearance included singers Michael Bublé, Bryan Adams, Alessia Cara, Shania Twain, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Drake. Canadian-born Hollywood stars also appeared, including Kiefer Sutherland, Mike Myers and Ryan Reynolds, as well as sports and political personalities — like former

astronaut and Governor General of Canada Julie Payette.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also took part, urging Canadians to remain cautious and at home. The event, billed as the broadest multi-platform broadcast event ever in Canada, was aimed at raising funds for the country’s food banks. “Canada, you’re amazing. The @foodbankscanada website has crashed under the weight of your generosity. Remember you can still donate after the show — please keep trying!” FoodBanks Canada tweeted.—AFP



In this file photo Canadian singer Celine Dion performs on the opening night of her new world tour “Courage” at the Videotron Centre in Quebec City, Quebec.—AFP photos



In this file photo Canadian singer Justin Bieber arrives for YouTube Originals’ “Justin Bieber: Seasons” premiere at the Regency Bruin Theatre in Los Angeles.

Washington food trucks head to the suburbs to find customers

The coronavirus epidemic has emptied downtown Washington of its popular food trucks ever since their main customers — lunchtime office workers — fled in March the safety of their homes. To survive, the truck operators followed them into the suburbs, taking orders online and advertising through social media. With drastic staff cuts and major belt tightening, the toughest operators have managed to survive — up to now. One of these operators is Jason Tipton, co-owner of the “Dirty South Deli.” Tipton recently parked his blue food truck in a residential neighborhood in north eastern Washington and handed out pre-ordered sandwiches wearing a face mask. He also catered to some new customers. “It’s a good surprise, it’s nice,” Tipton, 42, told AFP. “Today was very busy,” he smiled.

For this micro-enterprise with four employees — two of whom are in lockdown — adapting to the new circum-

stances is key to survival. “We have an online tool now to take orders, we advertise our tours on Twitter and in the Facebook neighborhood groups, and we use word to mouth,” Tipton said. Tipton has also found customers in places on the outskirts of Washington near the University of Maryland, where teachers and students live.

“On our own”

“We enjoy home cooking but we miss the variety of DC’s restaurants,” said private music teacher Elise Blake, 37, as she took her “DSD” sandwich. “This is different, a little bit of a splurge,” she said. “It’s savvy for a truck to come to the neighborhoods if you can’t go downtown,” added Blake’s boyfriend David Murray, 37, also a musician. Tipton seemed satisfied with the day’s work. “We made enough money to break even,” he said. The future, however, seems bleak. “We’re on our own, we just

have to make money.” The “DSD” partners would rather tough it out for a while because the alternative is to close. Tipton said he has not applied for federal aid, and does not know if the loan application he filed with the city will be accepted.

Jamaican blues

On Washington’s trendy H Street Kadeem Todd and Denville Myrie have parked their food truck — the “JerkaNite” — in front of the restaurant that they were setting up just as the coronavirus pandemic struck. The partners, both 28 years old, entered the food business in 2012 by selling organic dishes from Jamaica, their country of origin, at the Howard University campus.

As business grew they bought a second truck, and eight months ago decided to open a brick-and-mortar restaurant. “COVID-19 changed everything,” said Todd. Starting on March 18 “we had two

weeks of complete standstill. Really tough times.” Thanks to their Instagram account and positive word of mouth customers have begun to trickle back. The truck outside their restaurant accepts take-out orders while their second truck heads out twice a week, prowling for customers around Howard University and an apartment complex in nearby Maryland.

“Delivery apps have kept us afloat, but we can’t sustain this much longer,” he sighed, adding that he pared his staff of 13 down to seven. The partners are looking into seeking federal and local aid, but have little hope. “We’re trying to get out by ourselves, we can’t wait for somebody to save us,” he said.

“Focus on the present”

Zack Graybill, chairman of the regional food truck association which represents some 100 operators, hopes the crisis will be over by June — but doesn’t want to be

too optimistic. According to a poll of association members, 15 percent are not operating, 35 percent are trying food delivery by themselves or through apps, and “a huge bulk are roaming to residential buildings,” he said. Graybill is also the co-manager of “DC Slices,” an Arlington, Virginia-based food truck selling pizza.

“First two weeks, we were just traveling, going to random locations not sure if you would sell \$10 or \$500 worth of food,” he said. Survival comes at a price: two of his four trucks are no longer running, and his staff was slashed from 15 to three. “The important thing is to focus on the present,” he said.—AFP



Dirty South Deli food truck staff Brian Potter is seen at work.



Jerk@Nite food truck owners Kareem Todd (left) and Denville Myrie pose by their food truck parked in front of their newly acquired brick and mortar restaurant in Washington DC.



Dirty South Deli food truck owner Jason Tipton chats with a regular customer.—AFP photos

Bass therapy gets Romans dancing and laughing in face of lockdown

Laughing in the face of the coronavirus lockdown gripping Italy a troupe of performers complete with DJ and thumping-bass sound system is bringing dance fever and comedy to Rome’s densely-packed working class neighborhoods. Residents of all ages in the Italian capital’s San Basilio district threw open their windows to take in the “Under the same sky” show being performed in their very own pine-filled courtyard. “It’s a very popular show. We have a DJ, I play songs to get them dancing, even at their windows,” the group’s star, electric violinist Andrea Casta, told AFPTV.

“We alternate with the cabaret and a comedian. We also invited a singer from the neighborhood. It’s an open space and we’ll continue to go to the suburbs of Rome and to other cities.” The performers also dropped by The Corviale, a vast housing development on the outskirts of the city, to the delight of residents happy to escape for an hour while respecting social distancing rules. “Having ordinary people on the balcony is better than seeing the rich on the balconies at theatres, who have the possibility of living this situation more easily,” explained well-known comedian Antonio Giuliani. “Besides, we don’t go to their areas, we only go to working-class neighborhoods.”

Bringing the show home

In the courtyard, a few people dance and clap their hands, their smiles hidden behind face masks. But the real show is up above, at each window, where residents sing, laugh at off-colour jokes, and wave their lit-up mobile phones as if at a rock concert, calling out for more. “The children can’t leave the house. Sometimes we make them go down a bit with masks. But this is a beautiful moment, a moment for all, everyone has fun,” said Adriano Sindaco, enjoying the show with his daughter Giada. “These circumstances unite us, they don’t divide. Often there is isolation but here, we can meet,” added Anarita Napoli, her mouth covered with a mask.

“In normal times, everyone wants to go out to go to the theatre, to the pub, to listen to an artist. At the moment, they can’t go out, so we bring the show to their homes,” said guitarist Casta. Fellow entertainer Antonio Sindaco hopes he will not have to run “Under the same sky” in too many neighborhoods. “It will mean that we are cured, that there is no longer this virus and that we can return to normal life,” he said. “Otherwise we will continue, but with people this time one or two meters apart and outside. Always for free and for the poorer districts of Rome.”—AFP



Electric violinist Andrea Casta (center) performs in the courtyard of a popular apartment building for the show Sotto lo Stesso Cielo tour (Under the same sky tour) in San Basilio suburbs of Rome.—AFP photos



People with protective masks look from their windows at artists performing in the courtyard of a popular apartment building for the show Sotto lo Stesso Cielo tour (Under the Same Sky tour).

Dolphins reclaim Bosphorus as virus silences Istanbul



Dolphins swim in the straits of the Bosphorus where sea traffic has nearly come to a halt on April 25, 2020, as Turkish government announced a four-day curfew to prevent the spread of the epidemic COVID-19 caused by the novel coronavirus.—AFP

A lull in boat traffic and a fishing ban in Istanbul forced by the coronavirus pandemic has proved good news for some of the city’s most-loved inhabitants — the dolphins that swim in the fish-rich waters of the Bosphorus Strait between Europe and Asia. The Turkish city of 16 million has been under lockdown since Thursday as part of government measures to stem the spread of the coronavirus, following two successive weekends where it was also shut down. The latest confinement period is due to expire on Sunday midnight. The pandemic has claimed more than 2,700 lives in Turkey. Spotting dolphins in the Bosphorus — a usually very busy narrow waterway connecting the Mediterranean to the Black Sea right through the heart of Istanbul — is often a source of joy for the city’s residents.

But the lockdown has meant fewer ships and more fish in the water, encouraging the mammals to come closer to shore and prompting more frequent sightings. “A decrease in boat and human traffic across the Bosphorus has a big impact,” said Erol Orkcü, head of the amateur and sports fishing association in Istanbul. “Terrestrial and aquatic living things can remain free without human beings. That enables dolphins to come closer to the shoreline,” he told AFP. Before the pandemic, fishing was a daily ritual in Istanbul with hundreds lighting fires or bringing samovars for making tea as they prepared for long angling stints along the shore. The sight of thousands of amateur fishers on the

Galata Bridge and on the banks of the Bosphorus is one of the city’s iconic images. But they are now almost deserted.

“Terror” of fishing halted

Yoruk Isik, a dedicated ship spotter who snaps vessels passing through the Bosphorus, said he had photographed dolphins before the pandemic but now they were swimming much closer to the shore. Dolphins “are coming closer to the edge of the water as the terror of uncontrolled anglers on the shoreline has temporarily stopped,” he told AFP. “I call it terror because 90 percent of them are not aware of what they are doing and cause incredible environmental pollution,” he said.

At Sarayburnu, which separates the Golden Horn from the Sea of Marmara, a pod of dolphins were spotted swimming with an army of seagulls — to the joy of photographers. The visibility of the dolphins is seen as an indicator of a healthy maritime ecosystem as the mammals are fighting for survival. Turkish literary giant Yasar Kemal wrote about the devastation wrought on the country’s coastal ecosystems by the overhunting of dolphins for oil in his 1978 novel “The Sea-Crossed Fisherman”. Since 1983, maritime mammal hunting has been prohibited in Turkey, and dolphins are protected by law. —AFP



This combination of 20 pictures created on Sunday shows graffitis decorating metal shutter doors of closed businesses in Madrid, during a national lockdown to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease. Spain's daily coronavirus death toll dropped to 288 today, the lowest since March 20, as the country eased its lockdown to allow children outside for the first time in six weeks.—AFP

‘We’re going out!’: Spanish kids reclaim streets after weeks indoors

After six weeks stuck at home, Spain's children were allowed out Sunday to run, play or go for a walk as the government eased one of the world's toughest coronavirus lockdowns. Spain is among the hardest hit countries, with a death toll running at more than 23,000, putting it behind only the United States and Italy despite stringent restrictions imposed from March 14. But unlike other countries, Spain's children were kept indoors, with only adults allowed to leave the house to buy food, medicine, briefly walk the dog or seek urgent medical care. On Sunday, Spanish children took to the streets of Madrid to enjoy their newfound freedom.



Jose, 45, pushes her son Pol's stroller as she walks with her family.



A woman jumps rope with a girl in Valencia.



Joan, 45, chases his daughters Ines, 11, and Mar, 9, as they play in the street on Sunday, in Barcelona, during a national lockdown to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease.—AFP photos

Some rollerbladed while others rode bikes or pushed toy prams around, many wearing small masks to cover their faces. "It has been very good for me to get out," said six-year-old Ricardo after a runaround in Madrid with his younger sister. "We played hide and seek, we raced. We found a ladybug that was lost and we put it in among the ants." "Some parents took precautions, dressing their kids with protective gear before going out. "They're all properly equipped with masks and gloves," said Miguel Lopez, father of two children aged six and three, and who lives in an apartment in northwest Madrid. "It's like a day out for them, it's the most interesting thing for them in a month," Lopez told AFP.

‘Super excited’

Alvaro Paredes, seven, and his brother Javier, four, were just getting ready for their big adventure. "We

are going to go out in an hour's time, going about a kilometer (0.6 miles) on scooter or bicycle to do a tour around our neighborhood," their mother Inmaculada Paredes said. "They are super excited, very, very impatient. They were up at 6:30 am, saying 'We're going out, We're going out!'," she said.

From Sunday a maximum of three children under 14 years will be able to go out once a day, for one hour between 9:00 am (0700 GMT) and 9:00 pm, accompanied by one parent — and no further than one kilometre from their home. Health Minister Salvador Illa on Friday said it would be "a first step towards easing" the lockdown after earlier insisting that people be very prudent "because the health of the nation is at stake". The restriction on children had come under increasing criticism in Spain, with specialists warning of the danger it posed for their health and mental wellbeing. Last week one of Spain's deputy prime ministers Pablo Iglesias apologised for keeping them at home for six weeks, acknowledging it was "not at all easy" for them and saying thank you.

‘Common sense’

The government's initial plan to allow children to accompany adults only on their rare authorised trips, for example to supermarkets, satisfied no one and prompted a hasty retreat. "All our common sense tells us that it is safe for the children," said mother Paredes. "If I can go to a supermarket, which is an enclosed space, then going for a walk (in the open) has got to be safer." For both her and Miguel Lopez, this easing of the rules would have been welcome earlier but they understand the caution of the authorities, desperate to avoid any resurgence of the disease. "Many people have been really irresponsible," Lopez said.



Children run as they play in a park in Seville.



A man and a child wearing face masks, ride bicycles in Seville.



A child plays football with his father at Can Pere Antoni Beach in Palma de Mallorca.



Two children play on the Portixol Beach in Palma de Mallorca.

Acclaimed Swedish author Per Olov Enquist dies aged 85

Per Olov Enquist, one of Sweden's most acclaimed authors who wrote "The Visit of the Royal Physician," has died aged 85, his family told Swedish media on Sunday. The patriarch of 20th century Scandinavian literature, Enquist is known for powerful stories that weave his own melancholic life into the dark side of history. In his more than 20 novels, plays and essays, he drew heavily on his own experience as an oppressed child in a strictly religious home, as an athlete, a journalist and a destructive alcoholic, his leftwing convictions filling his writings. Born in 1934 in Hjoggböle in Sweden's far north, his books — including "The Crystal Eye" (1961), "The Parable Book" (2013), "The Magnetist's Fifth Winter" (1964) and "The March of the Musicians" (1978) — have been translated into a dozen languages. He won the 2001 August Prize, Swedish literature's top honour, for "The Visit of the Royal Physician", which earned him broad international acclaim and tells the story of a romance between the physician of the mad Danish King Christian VII and the queen.



Per Olov Enquist at his home in Stockholm in 2011.—GETTY IMAGES

Enquist, known in Sweden by his initials P.O., won a second August award for his autobiography "A Different Life" (2008), its name an homage to "A Life" by August Strindberg, the father of modern Swedish literature. "P.O. Enquist's importance for Swedish cultural life since the 1960s can't be exaggerated. He was the model for the socially-engaged poet who influenced generations of younger writers. It feels empty and unthinkable that he is gone," wrote Björn Wiman, culture editor of the Dagens Nyheter newspaper, on Sunday. His publisher Norstedts also posted a memorial on its website: "Few have, like him, inspired other writers, renewed the documentary novel, revitalized Swedish drama and touched readers for more than half a century."

‘Didn't give up’

The process of writing "A Different Life", he said, allowed him to work through and leave behind painful memories of sleeping in a bed meant for his still-born brother, of the void left by a father who died when he was not yet a year old, and of a strict mother who pushed him to invent sins to confess. Known for his Gregory Peck-like frown and silver crown in his later years, Enquist broke free from his family, competing in high jump in high school before attending Uppsala University, where he discovered journalism and writing.

He just missed qualifying for the Rome Olympics in the high jump in 1960. But as a journalist he covered the 1972 Munich Olympics when Palestinian militants took hostage and then killed members of the Israeli team. Enquist's transition to adulthood was scarred by depression, self-doubt and existential questions. He was 18 years old when Swedish author Stig Dagerman, whom Enquist admired, published "Our Need for Consolation is Insatiable" (1952).—AFP

Coalition rejects declaration of self-rule in south Yemen

RIYADH: The Saudi-led military coalition yesterday rejected Yemen separatists' declaration of self-rule over the country's south and demanded "an end to any escalatory actions". The separatists' move complicates a long and separate conflict, fought by the coalition and the internationally recognized government, against Houthi rebels who control much of the north. Yemen's separatists signed a power-sharing deal in Riyadh last November that quelled a battle - dubbed a "civil war within a civil war" - for the south that had in August seen them seize control of the second city of Aden.

"Following the surprising announcement of a state of emergency by the Southern Transitional Council, we re-emphasize the need to promptly implement the Riyadh Agreement," the coalition said according to tweets from the official Saudi Press Agency. "The Coalition demands an end to any escalatory actions and calls for return to the Agreement by the participating parties."

The STC, which is backed by key coalition partner the United Arab Emirates, on Sunday declared self-rule in southern Yemen, accusing the government of failing to perform its duties and of "conspiring" against the southern cause. The government has condemned the move and said the separatists - who have long agitated for independence in the south - would be responsible for the "catastrophic and dangerous" outcome.

The breakdown between the one-time allies comes as the coalition has extended a unilateral ceasefire aimed at fending off the coronavirus pandemic - an olive branch rejected by the Houthis. Compounding the country's troubles, at least 21 people were killed in flash flooding this month, with Aden's streets submerged and homes destroyed. The United Nations said Sunday that more than 100,000 people across Yemen have been affected by the torrential rains which had damaged roads, bridges and the electricity grid, and contaminated water supplies.

"Countless families have lost everything," Lise Grande, the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, said in statement. "This tragedy comes on top of the COVID-19 crisis, which comes on top of the pre-famine last year, which came on top of the worst cholera outbreak in modern history," she added. "The solution is clear: The parties to the conflict need to find the courage to stop fighting and start negotiating."

The Riyadh pact on power-sharing for the south had been hailed as averting the complete break-up of the country, but with a lack of implementation, observers have said it is effectively defunct. Cracks



ADEN: Fighters with Yemen's separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) stand guard at the entrance of the ministry of finance's premises in this southern city on Sunday after the council declared self-rule in the south. — AFP

emerged soon after it was signed, with complaints over food shortages in the south, a sharp depreciation of the currency and a lack of funds to pay public sector employees.

"We in (Saudi Arabia) and UAE strongly believe that the internationally backed Riyadh agreement has guaranteed an opportunity for the brotherly Yemeni people to live in peace," Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir said in a tweet. "We

reject any hostilities that will jeopardize the safety and stability of Yemen," he said.

While the government and the STC are technically allies in the long war against the Houthis, the secessionists believe the south should be an independent state - as it was before unification in 1990. On Sunday, Aden residents reported heavy deployments of STC forces in the city and a separatist source told AFP they had set up checkpoints "at all government facilities,

including the central bank and port of Aden".

Hussam Radman, a research fellow for the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, said the separatists were already in control of the military and security in Aden, where they have popular support. "But with this declaration, it will become responsible for the administrative side in the provisional capital that has witnessed an unprecedented decline lately" in the provision of services and economic performance, he said. — AFP

Saudi eliminates death penalty for...

Continued from Page 1

while he or she is a minor can no longer face execution. Instead, the individual will receive a prison sentence of no longer than 10 years in a juvenile detention facility," HRC President Awad Alawwad said in the statement.

It was not immediately clear when the decree, which was not immediately carried on state media, would take effect. "This is an important day for Saudi Arabia," Alawwad said. "The decree helps us in establishing a more modern penal code, and demonstrates the kingdom's commitment to following through on key reforms across all sectors of our country."

The announcement came just two days after the kingdom in effect scrapped the punishment of flogging, in a decision by the General Commission for the Supreme Court. The punishment will instead be replaced by prison time or fines. Capital punishment for crimes committed by people under the age of 18 runs contrary to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Saudi Arabia has ratified. The

decree is expected to spare the lives of at least six men who are on death row. They were accused of taking part in anti-government protests during the Arab Spring uprisings while they were under the age of 18.

Saudi Arabia, whose human rights record came under intense international scrutiny after the murder of a prominent Saudi journalist in 2018, is one of the world's biggest executioners after Iran and China, Amnesty International said in its latest annual report. It said the kingdom had executed 184 people in 2019, including at least one person charged with a crime committed as a minor. In April 2019, the Sunni-ruled kingdom beheaded 37 men convicted of terrorism charges. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has launched a series of social and economic reforms aimed at modernizing the conservative kingdom, which has no codified system of law to go with sharia texts.

But "hudud" or harsher punishment under Islamic law such as floggings are still applicable for serious offences, a Saudi official said. Hudud, which means "boundaries" in Arabic, is meted out for such sins as rape, murder or theft. But "hudud" punishments are rarely meted out as many offences must be proved by a confession or be verified by several adult Muslim witnesses, the official added. — Agencies

North Korea's Kim 'alive and well': Seoul

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is "alive and well", a top security adviser to the South's President Moon Jae-in said, downplaying rumors over Kim's health following his absence from a key anniversary. Conjecture over Kim has grown since his conspicuous no-show at April 15 celebrations for the birthday of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, the North's founder - the most important day in the country's political calendar.

"Our government position is firm," said Moon's special adviser on national security Moon Chung-in, in an interview with CNN on Sunday. "Kim Jong Un is alive and well." The adviser said that Kim had been staying in Wonsan - a resort town in the country's east - since April 13, adding: "No suspicious movements have so far been detected."

Kim has not made a public appearance since presiding over a Workers' Party politburo meeting on April 11, and the following day state media reported on him inspecting fighter jets at an air defence unit.

His absence unleashed a series of unconfirmed media reports over his condition, which officials in Seoul previously poured cold water on. "We have nothing to confirm and no special movement has been detected inside North Korea as of now," the South's presidential office said in a statement last week.

South Korea's unification minister Kim Yeon-chul reiterated Monday that remained the case, adding the "confident" conclusion was drawn from "a complex process of intelligence gathering and assessment". The comments came two years after Kim and Moon's first summit in the Demilitarized Zone that divides the peninsula. Seoul marked this anniversary with a ceremony at the South's northernmost train station, seeking to highlight its commitment to a cross-border railway project. But inter-Korean relations are largely frozen with talks between Washington and Pyongyang at a standstill, and there was no indication of any commemoration in the North.

Daily NK, an online media outlet run mostly by North Korean defectors, has reported Kim was undergoing treatment after a cardiovascular procedure earlier this month. Citing an unidentified source inside the country, it said Kim, who is in his mid-30s, had needed urgent treatment due to heavy smoking, obesity and fatigue. Soon afterwards, CNN reported that Washington was "monitoring intelligence" that Kim was in "grave danger" after undergoing surgery, quoting what it said was an anonymous US official. — AFP

Some countries to repatriate their...

Continued from Page 1

embassies in Kuwait, and they initially said they needed more time to repatriate their workers. "But as a result of continuous pressure from our side, they announced they will repatriate them...We are hopeful that through coordination and agreement these workers will be repatriated to their countries," Jarallah said.

The interior ministry has announced a one-month amnesty starting April 1 for an estimated 160,000 expat workers living illegally in the country, but the response has been tepid. Although no official figures have been released and with only four days left of the amnesty, only under 50,000 expats have benefited from the offer, under which no fines will be taken and airfare will be paid by the government.

MP Mohammad Al-Dallal asked the foreign minister about plans to repatriate illegal Indians, Egyptians, Bangladeshis and Filipinos, the largest foreign communities in Kuwait. He demanded dates of the repatriation and expected numbers of those who could leave. The lawmaker also asked for measures taken by the ministry against foreign countries who refused to take their nationals, although the same countries have repatriated large numbers of their nationals from several other countries while excluding Kuwait. Dallal also demanded a list of aid Kuwait had presented to Egypt, India, the Philippines and Bangladesh since 1990. Local media reported yesterday that Sri Lanka has asked Kuwait to delay the repatriation of its nationals living illegally until May 30.

Rapporteur of the National Assembly's health and labor committee MP Saadoun Hammad said yesterday the panel is ready to complete legislation on the population structure and visa traders

within days after receiving the draft laws. He expected that such issues could be finalized at a meeting of the Assembly's office and officials of various parliamentary committees due to take place yesterday. The meeting is expected to decide which issues have the priority to be debated in the Assembly if a session is held.

The public prosecution meanwhile is reportedly investigating around 10 cases involving visa traders, and that dozens of people are detained and being interrogated. An interior ministry colonel and around nine of his partners are involved in the first case. A special judge yesterday extended their detention at the Central Jail pending trial.

National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem called on the government and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh to reveal the names of any MP who tries to intervene to help visa traders. He said he heard that some people tried to intervene to let visa traders off the hook, affirming that the government must hold visa traders responsible for the problem of marginal labor and refer them to the public prosecution. Visa traders have been involved in human trafficking and bringing people from various countries in exchange for money, granting them a visa or renewing their residency without giving them actual jobs.

Meanwhile, children in China's two most important cities went back to school yesterday after more than three months at home, as coronavirus restrictions eased and governments around the world began charting a path out of the pandemic lockdown. Europe's four worst-affected countries all reported marked drops in their daily death tolls, offering hope that the outbreak may have peaked in some places - at least for now.

But leaders and experts remain divided on how quickly to revive shuttered economies while maintaining a delicate balance between freedom and safety. Italy and New York laid out partial reopening plans, with France and Spain to follow suit this week, while tens of thousands of final-year students returned to school in Shanghai and Beijing

after months of closures.

"I'm glad, it's been too long since I've seen my classmates," 18-year-old Hang Huan said in Shanghai. "I've missed them a lot." Students in Beijing must have their temperatures checked at school gates and show "green" health codes on an app that calculates a person's infection risk, according to the education ministry. Virus numbers in China - where the disease first emerged late last year - have dwindled as the country begins to cautiously lift control measures, although fears remain of a potential resurgence and cases imported from abroad.

Primary schools in Norway also reopened yesterday, along with some businesses in Switzerland, such as hairdressers and florists, while New Zealand prepared to begin its phased exit from lockdown in the evening. "There is no widespread, undetected community transmission in New Zealand," Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared. "We have won that battle."

In an Oslo suburb, Karine Rabbe brought her seven-year-old daughter Tilde to school in the rain after six weeks of online teaching. "She was ready at six o'clock this morning, three hours early. She was so excited to go back. No alarm clock, we don't need that," Rabbe said.

More than 205,000 coronavirus deaths have been confirmed across the globe - over a quarter in the United States. Italy has the second-highest death toll at 26,000, followed by Spain, France and Britain, all at well over 20,000. But on Sunday Britain's daily tally was the lowest since March 31, while Italy and Spain's were the lowest in a month. France's toll was a drop of more than a third on the previous day's figures.

Those encouraging numbers blew relief through a continent frustrated by restrictions designed to slow the spread of the disease. "We cannot continue beyond this lockdown - we risk damaging the country's socioeconomic fabric too much," said Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte as he unveiled a plan to emerge from Europe's longest shutdown, in place since early March. People will have to wear masks in public and rigorously observe social distancing

measures when the country's current restrictions are eased on May 4.

Britain's leader, Boris Johnson, returned to work yesterday after being hospitalized by COVID-19, one of nearly three million people known to have been infected worldwide. The pandemic has forced more than half of humanity into lockdowns, upending lives and tipping the global economy toward a recession of a severity not seen in decades. Millions of Muslims are marking a Ramadan like no other under restrictions for a month of dusk-to-dawn fasting that in happier times involves large family meals. Saudi Arabia partially lifted its curfew, but said it would maintain a round-the-clock lockdown in the holy city of Makkah.

In Spain, which has had some of the strictest measures in Europe, children ventured outside Sunday for the first time since mid-March, some wearing small masks and gloves. Not every country has enforced social distancing during the pandemic, however. Secretive Turkmenistan, one of the few places not to have reported a single COVID-19 case - despite bordering virus hotspot Iran - held festivities to honor its national horse, with spectators packed into a hippodrome.

While cases and deaths plateau, the world remains in wait-and-see mode as scientists race to develop treatments and, eventually, a vaccine for the virus. Several countries plan to introduce virus tracing apps to alert users if they are near someone who has tested positive - technology already downloaded by nearly two million Australians, despite privacy concerns.

In New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo said a first stage of a reopening would start on May 15 if hospitalizations decrease. But for some conservative-led US states, that timeframe is too long. Rejecting the advice of top disease experts, Georgia has allowed thousands of businesses to resume operations, and Oklahoma will let restaurants and cinemas reopen from May. "People are still going to get it. But Oklahomans are safe and we're ready for a measured reopening," Governor Kevin Stitt told Fox News.

Stars

Daily SuDoku

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

Yesterday's Solution

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

very hard

STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)

Career matters should be going very well for you today, Aries. A sudden change regarding your work could catapult you into a position you've been hoping to reach for a long time. A rise in income could result. You've worked hard and done very well, so what may seem a lucky break to others is actually the result of intense, determined effort on your part. Enjoy your success and make the most of it.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)

A sudden desire to expand your horizons could have you and possibly a romantic partner considering returning to school, Taurus, perhaps for an advanced degree. The school you're considering, however, might be located in another state or even a foreign country. Following through with your desire could require some careful planning. As a result, you and your beloved may have some intense conversations over the next few days.

Libra (September 23-October 22)

A female visitor could come to your door today with some interesting, useful information, Libra. It might involve anything from stock market trends to a forthcoming wedding to occult and metaphysical matters. Whatever it is, you'll find it captivating, and might just sit and listen to your guest for quite a while. By the time she leaves, your mind may well be spinning. Take a walk to clear your head or you'll be awake all night.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

Today your relationships with just about everyone - friends, relatives, colleagues, and romantic partners - should be going very well, Scorpio. Your communication is good, and your ability to see the other person's point of view is clearer than usual. This might be a bit disconcerting, as it could conflict with your viewpoint, but bear in mind you don't have to agree with others to learn from them. Enjoy your day.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Some new ideas for expanding your horizons on some level could come to you today through an unexpected source, Gemini, possibly even dreams or visions. If an idea does come through a dream or flash of insight, don't write it off as crazy. It probably warrants some careful consideration, if nothing else. Some research is definitely called for, and possibly consulting with people in the know. Think about it!

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Relations with colleagues on the job could be very cooperative today, Sagittarius, probably because you're about to complete a project of some kind that could result in higher income for everyone. Communication should be open and honest, and for once you'll probably be able to reach everyone you phone without having to leave any messages. Go with the flow and all should be completed successfully. Onward and upward!

Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Ideas for a new enterprise, which could be anything from a party to a vacation to a new business, could have you spending a lot of time on the phone today, Cancer. You'll need to consult with people who know about what you want to do and at least lay the groundwork for making solid arrangements. Some of what you hear may be confusing, but don't be afraid to ask for an explanation. Go to it!

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Friendships and romantic bonds should provide a rich source of support and good companionship today, Capricorn. Conversation is likely to be light, covering general matters like current events and the weather, but this might be just what you need right now. Someone could introduce you to some new friends from far away who have some intriguing news of their own.

Leo (July 23-August 22)

Have you been thinking about getting fit by investing in some exercise equipment? If so, Leo, this might be the day to actually go out and get it. Don't be surprised if friends, relatives, and neighbors all want to come over and try it out. Health and fitness are very much on your mind right now, so you might also want to pick up some books on whatever discipline interests you the most.

Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

Today you might find yourself hosting an impromptu social event, Aquarius, and more people could show up than you initially counted on. Don't worry about it, however. The party should be enjoyable for everyone even if the place is a bit crowded. Your visitors can look out for themselves. Among the unexpected guests might be an attractive, interesting person who could shape up to be a potential love partner. Relax and enjoy your day.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Your curiosity and creative energy may be stimulated today by information you receive from books, documentaries, or conversations with people familiar with the field you're exploring. As a result, Virgo, you could come up with an innovative new project that keeps you and some colleagues busy for a long time. But don't worry - this enterprise should be full of surprises and therefore anything but tedious. Go to it!

Pisces (February 19-March 20)

A festival, rally, or other mass event could occur today in your community, Pisces. It could center on a social, ecological, or political issue. You could well decide to attend in the company of a romantic partner, and perhaps a group of friends, too. This event could prove exciting for you, although some of what you learn there might be unsettling. Take a notebook and plenty of pens. You'll want to keep a record.

Find the way

CAUGHT IN THE WEB!

Don't shake the silk or get too close... or you'll wake her up!

escape!

Join the dots

18

19

20

17

16

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1

Crossword

Vegetables Crossword

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

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3→

5→

7→

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16→

14↓

12↓

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1↓

ARTICHOKE
BEET
BELL PEPPER
BROCCOLI
BRUSSEL SPROUT
CABBAGE
CARROT
CORN

CUCUMBER
EGGPLANT
GARLIC
MUSHROOM
ONION
PEAS
POTATO
PUMPKIN
RADISH

Sports

Photo of the day



RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil: Stuntrider, Aaron Colton performs at Santos Dumont airport in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

NRL embarrassed after players flout lockdown

MELBOURNE: Australia's National Rugby League has criticised two players for an "unacceptable" breach of social distancing rules by having a camping trip in rural New South Wales state. With the NRL season suspended due to the coronavirus, Australia internationals Latrell Mitchell and Josh Addo-Carr camped at Mitchell's farm near Taree, on NSW's mid-north coast, with Addo-Carr posting photos of the trip on social media.

One picture published widely in Australian media featured the Aboriginal rugby league stars gathered by a campfire with 10 other people. "Our players are role models and we expect them to lead by example during this pandemic," the NRL said in a statement on Monday.

"On face value, the image in today's media is both disappointing and an unacceptable breach of health orders. "The NRL will be speaking to the players involved to seek further information and we will ensure the players provide any assistance authorities require." Australia, which has recorded more than 6,700 COVID-19 cases and 83 deaths, has ordered people to stay at home with a few exceptions including trips to work or school, buying essential supplies and exercise.

NSW Police deputy commissioner Gary Worboys told Australian media police would investigate the camping trip. Addo-Carr, a winger for the Melbourne Storm club, said he was with family on the trip. "I don't know what to say. I came up here for my pregnant missus, she's about to have a baby, then spent some time with my family," Sydney newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, quoted him as saying.

"Mate, it was cultural gathering. Learning about our land and our culture, learning how to hunt, live off the land." The lockdown breach has embarrassed the NRL which is trying to build trust with authorities before it attempts to restart the competition on May 28. The season was suspended in March after two rounds due to travel restrictions aimed at containing the virus. "We are embarking on a significant education program to ensure our players understand what is acceptable behaviour ahead of the resumption of training," the NRL said.

"When training resumes our players and officials must comply with biosecurity protocols that go further than current government restrictions. "On face value, today's matter is unacceptable and we support the government in any action they believe necessary." —Reuters

New Zealand sets up committee to review Super Rugby future

Shutdown has idled hundreds of players and staff

MELBOURNE: New Zealand Rugby (NZR) have formed a committee with the country's five Super Rugby teams to review operating models and plot a way forward for the domestic game amid a shutdown in global sport brought by the coronavirus.

Super Rugby, which also includes teams from Australia, South Africa, Japan and Argentina, was suspended in March after seven rounds of the season when travel curbs and border controls aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 made it untenable.

As in other rugby nations, the shutdown has idled hundreds of players and staff in New Zealand and placed pressure on the finances of NZR and provincial unions.

NZR said the review committee was comprised of the chairmen of the five Super Rugby sides and NZR, along with NZR Chief Executive Mark Robinson and prominent sports executive Liz Dawson as a "Private Investor Representative".

The committee's review called 'Aratipu', the Maori word for growth, will focus on "growing, regeneration and invigoration", NZR said in a

statement on Monday.

"All of the Super Rugby licenses were up for renewal in 2020 and a review was already underway as part of that, however, the impact of COVID-19 creates another dimension and means we need to take a broader look at how we continue the 25-year legacy of Super Rugby for New Zealand," Blues chairman Don Mackinnon, who will chair the committee, said in the statement.

"The scope of Aratipu will include the New Zealand Super Rugby competition (local and off-shore), clarify Super Rugby's role in the domestic high-performance pathway, review the ownership and equity structure, and digital rights."

The committee is expected to submit a preliminary report to NZR by the end of June, with the

review's findings to be provided later in the year. New Zealand have dominated Super Rugby since its inception in 1996, claiming 17 out of 24 championships and the last five in succession.

With virtually all sport halted and teams unable to travel due to COVID-19 curbs, the future of the competition remains up in the air. NZR CEO Robinson said his administration was committed to SANZAAR, the governing body of Super Rugby which also includes the Australian, South African and Argentine rugby unions.

But Rugby Australia chairman Paul McLean cast doubt on the competition starting up again with South Africa and Argentina's involvement due to the coronavirus. "I can't see and (NZR) can't see South Africa

Private
Investor
Representative



NZR Chief Executive Mark Robinson

and Argentina being involved anywhere in the short term along the way," McLean told The Australian newspaper. —Reuters

Belaey soars through epic trail across Lebanon's mountains



BEIRUT: Kenny Belaey, the Belgian athlete and trail bike champion, recently completed the 470 km Lebanon Mountain Trail, in what was a thrilling journey of exploration and wild earth. Watch the entire video and relive the ride with Kenny Belaey on the LMT on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube.

He is now the first to ever complete the entire trail by trial bike. "Lebanon is by far one of my favorite countries I ever visited." Said Kenny Belaey, having just been to 76 unique towns and villages that spanned from the north to the south of Lebanon. "It was an honor to be the first ever to ride over the extreme difficult hiking terrain on a bicycle." He said.

He was completely taken with every part of the experience. He began at Marjayoun in the south and made his way north from there.

A few of the places that really stuck out for him were the Shouf Biosphere Reserve, the Jezzine Waterfall, Aqoura Lakes, Niha, Hasbaya, Qehmez, the Tannourine Forest Reserve, the Fortress of Niha, Qadisha Valley, Bsharri and the Cedars of God.

Kenny only stayed at locally-owned-and-operated establishments, guesthouses, and bed and breakfasts. Eating what they prepared, and learning about their traditional way of life.



"Its charming people, rich culture and epic landscape made me want to discover the Mountain Trail even more." Continued Belaey. Among the amazing people he met was one of his trail guides, an 85-year-old villager who grew up along the trail, as his ancestors had before him.

This was not Kenny's first trip to Lebanon, having visited several times before. With each visit he found himself more curious about the country. Finishing the trail, he doesn't think this will be his last trip either. He considered his experiences of Lebanon. "After crossing this path, I felt like there were different countries in one: different weather,

sceneries, mountains, cultures, foods and varying architecture." He concluded by saying, "I loved it, and most of all, I loved the people I met along the way and how hospitable they were."

Kenny Belaey is a world champion trial bike athlete: 6 times overall World Cup winner with 4 European titles and 9 World titles. He is the world record medal holder with 20 medals out of 23 world championship entries. Kenny travels the world with his shows from NBA arenas in the USA to big events all over Europe. He was also the first biker ever to ride over a 16m long slack-line over a 120m gorge at 3500m elevation.

Sports

Before Leicester, Ranieri’s brush with glory with his beloved Roma

‘We had three or four chances to win the match that we wasted’

PARIS: Claudio Ranieri won the hearts of the football world when he took Leicester City to the 2016 Premier League title, but six years earlier he came to within touching distance of an even more romantic achievement — a league title with home town team Roma.

Ranieri, born and raised in Rome and a lifelong fan of the capital club, had taken over a side with no points in the early stages of the 2009-10 season, but after a slow start led the Giallorossi to a 24-match unbeaten run that left them at the summit in Italy with four matches left.

However 10 years ago on Saturday a tidal wave of emotion came crashing down in one of the most dramatic matches in recent Serie A history, a 2-1 home defeat to Sampdoria which all but handed Jose Mourinho’s Inter Milan the title and the chance to complete a now famous league, cup and Champions League treble.

The loss, and Inter’s 3-1 defeat of Atalanta the previous day, put Mourinho’s team two points ahead with three games remaining, a lead that the future European champions would not relinquish. The match was held at a balmy Stadio Olimpico in Rome and was the last real contest facing Ranieri’s team, with an entertaining Samp side featuring Antonio Cassano chasing down a Champions League place.

TRAUMATIC

A volcanic opening 45 minutes strengthened the feeling that Ranieri was about to ram Mourinho’s insults — he had called his fellow former Chelsea boss a serial loser and mocked his English — back down

the Portuguese’s throat, as Francesco Totti swept the hosts in front early on and continued to pull the strings in a dominating display.

However Samp boss Gigi Delneri switched things up at half-time and the tide turned. The first half’s missed chances came back to bite Roma and a clinical Giampaolo Pazzini stunned the raucous home support with a brace that came after Roma wasted more opportunities and had several penalty shouts turned down.

“No-one would have complained if that first half had finished 3-0,” Ranieri said earlier this month. “We had three or four chances to win the match that we wasted. Then those two goals whipped our legs out from under us.”

The Samp defeat left a deep mark on a talented team that afterwards sank into the doldrums. So traumatic was it for Ranieri’s fellow Roman Daniele De Rossi that he repeatedly said it was the one fixture from his 18 years at the club that he would play again.

“I’d make sure that I marked Pazzini man-to-man. That match was the game that could have given us the glory that team deserved,” he said.

SALT IN THE WOUND

Roma’s exhilarating run began in early November when they were 14 points off the top and they only took the league lead in mid-April thanks in part to dramatic 2-1 wins over Juventus, local rivals Lazio and the stuttering Inter.

However the stinging defeat to Samp left Inter top by two points and the following week Lazio fans were quick to rub salt into the wound.



Claudio Ranieri

They raised an ironic “Oh nooo” banner as their team lost 2-0 to Inter, in a surreal, celebratory atmosphere in Rome after Lazio supporters had demanded their players let the Nerazzurri win.

With two wins for both teams ahead of the final round of matches, some 15,000 Roma fans made the trip to Chievo in the hope that Inter — who needed to win — might slip up at Siena, and at half-time their side were top thanks to strikes from Mirko Vucinic and De Rossi and a goalless first period in Tuscany.

However Diego Milito, who would cap a famous campaign with the goals that would hand Inter their

third European Cup, struck just before the hour mark in Siena to end Ranieri’s dreams of winning his boyhood club’s Scudetto.

The disappointment marked the end of a fierce battle between the two sides that had seen Roma finish second to Inter three of the previous four seasons, with Mourinho’s ageing team creaking past their best after he left for Real Madrid.

Roma have now been waiting for another title since 2001 and Ranieri, who resigned the following February, would have to wait a few more years before he finally made history. — AFP

How Anelka, Drogba blazed trail with chaotic season in China

SHANGHAI: A pay dispute, an eccentric owner and smashed-up furniture — and arguing with fans for refusing to bow. When Premier League stars Didier Drogba and Nicolas Anelka made surprising moves to China in 2012, they put Chinese football on the map.

Carlos Tevez, Marouane Fellaini and others would ultimately follow as money poured into the Chinese Super League, but the former Chelsea duo’s chaotic spell served as a cautionary tale.

Anelka lasted only one, turbulent year at Shanghai Shenhua while his fellow forward Drogba did barely six months at the club. Drogba signed in June 2012 at 34, just weeks after he scored the winning penalty for Chelsea in the Champions League final against Bayern Munich.

“For me it would have been easy to go to another team in Europe but I chose China because of the challenge,” he said at the time, after becoming one of the world’s best-paid players on a reported \$300,000 a week.

Hundreds of Shanghai Shenhua supporters mobbed the Ivorian as he touched down in Shanghai. “Shenhua’s nuclear bomb has arrived,” Shenhua goalkeeper Wang Dalei said. Drogba lived up to expectations, obliterating opposition defences and scoring eight goals in 11 matches.

Shenhua fans affectionately called him “Devil Beast”. Anelka was already at Shenhua when Drogba pitched up having also signed from Chelsea, in January 2012, on similarly vast wages. But while Drogba was a success on the pitch, the Frenchman found himself sometimes playing out of position in defensive midfield or on the wing. Anelka managed only three goals in 23 matches before both departed China in January 2013.

So what went wrong?

Shenhua, one of the traditional heavyweights of Chinese football, were owned at the time by video



SHANGHAI: File photo shows then Shanghai Shenhua player Nicolas Anelka (C) taking part in a team training session at Shanghai Stadium in Shanghai. — AFP

gaming mogul Zhu Jun, who fancied himself as a player on occasion.

Zhu made Anelka China’s first direct import from the Premier League and he also lured another famous Frenchman, Jean Tigana, as coach.

But the ex-Fulham manager was hit by a player revolt against his training methods and was sacked after just five games in charge. Upon learning his services were no longer required, Tigana departed the stadium before kick-off for a home game, leaving Shenhua without a coach for the match and empty seats in the dugout.

Anelka, who had no coaching experience, announced he was Tigana’s replacement. But Zhu soon brought in Argentine Sergio Batista as coach, much to Anelka’s annoyance. The former Arsenal, Real Madrid and Liverpool forward also became embroiled in a public row with a fan after refusing to perform the customary bow following a defeat.

“I don’t care,” Shenhua’s skipper, nicknamed “Le Sulk” by British press because of his moody de-

meanour, reportedly said. There was the odd high, such as a 5-1 home thrashing of rivals Hangzhou Greentown with Drogba scoring twice and Anelka laying on two assists.

But it was only a glimpse of what might have been and the pair found themselves pawns in a boardroom dispute. Zhu said his fellow owners had promised him a majority stake because of his heavy investment, and he threatened to withhold the foreign players’ salaries unless they handed it over.

Drogba and Anelka missed several games between them towards the end of the season, ostensibly due to injury, but many suspected the dispute was to blame.

Shenhua finished the season ninth out of 16 teams, despite Drogba’s fierce determination to win — after one match ended in a draw he smashed furniture in the dressing room. “Wait for me, I’ll be back,” Drogba told media after scoring on the final day of the season. Weeks later both he and Anelka were gone. — AFP

Captain Knight concerned for women’s sport

LONDON: England women’s cricket captain Heather Knight revealed on Sunday her “worry” that all women’s sport could get left behind once the coronavirus pandemic ends. Sport around the world has been left in limbo by COVID-19 and now there are concerns that cash-strapped governing bodies, desperate to regain lost income, will prioritise money-spinning men’s events over generally less lucrative women’s fixtures when live action resumes.

Asked if she feared women’s cricket might now be less of a concern in the current climate, Knight told Britain’s Press Association: “That’s the worry in women’s sport across the board, not just in cricket.

“We’ve obviously got to accept that the most commercially viable parts of the game will be given priority. “But we’re making sure that the women’s game gets a bigger voice and we’re given the same sort of chance to get back playing as the men are.”

Women’s cricket has made huge strides in recent years, with more than 86,000 spectators attending the Melbourne Cricket Ground to see Australia beat India in the Twenty20 World Cup final in March — a match that took place shortly before sport was brought to a standstill by the virus.

“I’ve only ever seen it like that for a Test match, that was pretty cool knowing it was for a women’s game,” said Knight. “I just hope it was not just a one-off event and that support continues and the people that came to watch and enjoyed will continue to do so, not just in Australia but all over the place.”

But with the start of the English cricket season put back until July 1, doubts remain over England women’s limited overs matches at home to India, originally scheduled for June. England and Wales Cricket Board chief executive Tom Harrison refused to say Friday that if men’s international cricket was given the go-ahead on health and safety grounds later in the season that women’s matches would be played as well.

However, he did say the ECB were working “very closely” with their Indian counterparts to reschedule the series. “We are going to, of course, do everything we can to get women’s cricket on,” Harrison insisted. “It’s no less important than the men’s game.” — AFP

Archer finds WCup medal

LONDON: England’s Jofra Archer said Sunday he’d finally found his World Cup winner’s medal after “going mad” looking for the prized possession following a house move.

The 25-year-old Sussex fast bowler published a photograph of the medal on a bed with the caption: “Randomly searching the guest bedroom and boom.” Archer, when previously asked about the whereabouts of his medal, told BBC Radio on Saturday: “I had it hanging off a portrait someone did for me and sent to me, I had my medal hanging on that.

“I moved flat and the picture is on the new wall but there’s no medal. I turned the house upside down for about a week but I still haven’t managed to find it. “I know it should be in the house so I will keep eyes out for it but I’ve gone mad looking for it already.”

Last year saw the Barbados-born Archer establish himself on the global stage as he helped England win their first men’s 50-over global title, with his 20 wickets at 23.05 the most taken by any member of the champions’ squad during the tournament.

Archer, who only made his international debut in 2019, was also given the daunting responsibility of bowling the Super Over in the final at Lord’s. But he held his nerve brilliantly as England edged out New Zealand in a thrilling finish decided on boundary countback when the teams’ scores were level after both regulation play and cricket’s answer to ‘extra time’. — AFP

NY governor wants sports teams return

NEW YORK: The governor of New York raised the possibility Sunday of some major-league sports teams returning to the playing field or arena — only with no fans in the stands.

Governor Andrew Cuomo said he had spoken to several sports team owners — he did not name them, but New York’s teams include the iconic Yankees baseball team, as well as football, hockey and basketball clubs — and he speculated that for some it might make economic sense to play before empty stadiums.

Cuomo made the remarks during a daily briefing on the coronavirus in his state, the hardest hit in the US by the pandemic.

He also sketched plans for slowly reopening the state’s economy, saying manufacturing and construction firms may resume working on May 15, but any easing would first take place in the north of the state where the virus has been less a problem.

But he noted that weeks of enforced confinement have taken a psychological toll on New Yorkers, and said a resumption of sports competition could help. “We want to bring sports back, so there’s an activity that people can watch on TV,” he told reporters.

Cuomo said that while he was no expert on sports economics, some sports might earn enough in television revenues that they could make a go of it even without ticket sales.

‘BE CREATIVE’

“What sports can you do without an audience? What sports can you make work economically that you don’t have to sell a seat in the stadium or in the arena?” he asked rhetorically. Virtually all organized sports in the country — professional and amateur — have been halted since mid-March over concerns about the risks posed when large groups of fans crowd together.

There are a few exceptions: World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has been authorized to operate in Florida, where it is classified as an essential service.

Several horse-racing tracks, in Florida and elsewhere, are also operating though before empty stands. It remains unclear when the profusion of sports teams across this sports-crazed country will again be able to take to the field.

Cuomo said determining the financial calculus of returning to play was not part of his portfolio. But he urged team owners to “be creative — try to figure it out.”

Andrew Zimbalist, a specialist in sports economics at Smith College in Massachusetts, said that US major-league teams earn an average of at least 40 percent of their revenue from ticket sales.

But for minor-league teams and others, ticket sales account for a greater share of revenue since they earn much less from selling broadcast rights. — AFP

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Stars on their sofas compete for fans

‘Live’ and slightly dangerous



GENEVA: In this file photo taken on Sept 20, 2019, Team Europe's Roger Federer (left) and teammate Rafael Nadal watch a match as part of the 2019 Laver Cup tennis tournament in Geneva. — AFP

PARIS: Across social media, sports stars denied the chance to play in front of a crowd are increasingly going “live” in sometimes surprising ways to connect with an audience.

To the delight of fans, happy to discover some hidden facets of their idols, stars from Karim Benzema to the Brazilian legend Ronaldo and even Rafael Nadal, who initially struggled with Instagram, are dropping their habitual discretion to interact live with their millions of followers. “As competitions are suspended, sportsmen and women are no longer necessarily supervised by the club’s press officer,” Boris Helleu, an expert on digital strategies in sport, told AFP.

“The athlete becomes his own media and can speak out on subjects that we didn’t hear about before.”

One of those who has cracked open his armour on a range of topics is the normally prickly Benzema, who posts videos on YouTube as “Nueve Live” — a play on his shirt number, and has more than 33 million Instagram followers.

His broadcasts have attracted as many as 130,000 viewers live with hundreds of thousands more catching

up later. The tone is relaxed and humorous, but the French striker has also been mildly controversial, taking sides in French rap politics and also airing his grudge over being banned from the French team.

Asked about Olivier Giroud, who played centre forward when France won the World Cup two years ago, Benzema replied: “Everyone knows the difference between F1 and karting, and I’m F1.”

Benzema also builds his audience by chatting with the type of celebrities who appeal to a young Francophone audience, but when it comes to star guests, no one tops Ronaldo.

Ronaldo, the president of Valladolid in La Liga, has interviewed FIFA president Gianni Infantino and also talked to fellow Real Madrid Galacticos David Beckham, Roberto Carlos, Iker Casillas and Luis Figo.

Switching from Portuguese to English, Spanish and Italian, the Brazilian double Ballon d’Or winner chatted matily with former team-mates as if in a private phone call with an old friend, even though tens of thousands of people were watching. When his turn came, Beckham said he had watched the earlier chats and thought

“Figo talked too much”. Ronaldo responded by defending the Portuguese winger with a series of wife jokes. Meanwhile, Novak Djokovic, sharp and articulate in English, has worked his way through the upper echelons of men’s tennis in a series of live chats which have moved beyond good-natured banter into the politics and economics of the sport.

Nadal caused great amusement as he struggled with the technology in a three-way Instagram chat with Roger Federer and Andy Murray.

“As you can see I am a disaster,” he said at one point. A star aiming for a young audience, Antoine Griezmann of Barcelona, opted for gaming platform Twitch when, along with brother Theo, he hosted a live online combat session.

Contestants included fellow members of the France World Cup team Paul Pogba and Ousmane Dembele as well as the best known French online combat gamers. In 24 hours shooting virtual guns, they raised 29,200 euros (\$31,600) for the Red Cross.

In a medium where he can set the agenda, Benzema, a polarising player, has revealed a “frankness” that

seemed both natural and confusing.

Helleu said the Real Madrid striker was using the medium well. “The mistake would be to consider that he’s a loose cannon, when he’s not,” Helleu said. “On the contrary, the difficulty of the exercise is to be authentic and not a glass of tepid water. And that, for the moment, he does it well,” said Helleu, a professor of sports management at the University of Caen.

“Many footballers aim to counter the erroneous image of the guy who’s just good at kicking a ball, by showing that they have a personality, a sense of humour and an opinion,” he added.

The athletes with their social media are exploiting a void caused by the cancellation of live sport normally shown by television rights holders and are attracting a young audience. “Before, the sportsman’s voice only existed and was only possible through the traditional press. Now that’s no longer the case,” says Helleu. “Once the competition is back on track, it will be interesting to see if Benzema says: ‘We had a good time, I’m keeping this going.’” His followers can’t wait for that. —AFP

Thiem says struggling players don’t deserve his hard-won money

VIENNA: Tennis world number three Dominic Thiem expressed scepticism Sunday about plans to set up a fund to help lower-ranked players struggling because of the shutdown of the sport.

In an interview with Austria’s Krone newspaper, Thiem was asked about last week’s announcement by world number one Novak Djokovic that he was working with Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal to organise aid for players struggling with the paralysis of the game due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“Quite honestly I have to say that no tennis player will be fighting to survive, even those who are much lower-ranked,” Thiem said, adding: “None of them are going to starve.”

He said that his experience competing on

the sport’s Futures circuit had shown him that there are “many, many players who don’t put the sport above everything else and don’t live in a professional manner.”

“I wouldn’t really see why I should give such players money,” he went on. “I would rather give money to people or organisations that really need it,” Thiem said. The plan proposed by Djokovic would involve raising between \$3 million (2.75 million euros) and \$4.5 million, with the cash coming from the prize money for the season-ending World Tour Finals or the final bonus pools for top players.

“None of us top players got anything handed to us, we all had to fight our way up,” Thiem said. “I don’t have the guarantee in any job that I will do well and earn lots of money, that’s my opinion on the matter,” he said. — AFP

Paris 2024 Olympics plans ‘obsolete’

PARIS: Plans for the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris are “obsolete and outdated” in light of the coronavirus pandemic, IOC member and former French sports minister Guy Drut said Sunday.

Former Olympic champion Drut, who won gold in the 110m hurdles in 1976 and took silver four years before, added in a column for franceinfo that the Olympic Games needed to be “reinvented” to put them more in touch with reality. “The crisis we’re going through has a lasting impact on our daily lives, our way of life, our economy, our social pact, our choice of society,” wrote Drut. “It cannot and must not remain without effect on the imperative necessity which is to reinvent ourselves.”

“The Olympic and Paralympic Games are no exception to this new context. They too must reinvent themselves.”

The International Olympic Committee, jointly with local organisers, has been forced into delaying the 2020 Tokyo Olympics by one year to 2021 because of the COVID-19 outbreak.

But Drut, an IOC member since 1996, argued that postponement of dates was just the tip of the iceberg.

“Can the response to this crisis be translated by simply postponing dates, without the Games model — both economic and organisational — also being deeply rethought?” asked the 69-year-old, who served as sports minister in France between 1995-7 under Jacques Chirac.

“The beautiful project that we built and carried in the bid phase for Paris 2024 is now obsolete, outdated, out of touch with reality.”

“If the project is to remain un-

changed, we must review its means and refocus on the essential. The first necessity is to make a budgetary reassessment of what Paris 2024 Olympics will cost. “The Games of yesterday will not be the Games of tomorrow. We have to accept that and together imagine a new model. “We have to rethink them to adapt them, to keep them relevant to the changing world. They will not be able to take place at any cost, disconnected from reality, on the ‘margins’ of the world.”

In that context, Drut suggested hosting certain events on a single site “whatever the organising country”, citing as an example Tahiti or Hawaii for surfing. He also proposed limiting the number of additional sports. “It is very expensive to build new equipment for an event that lasts only three, four days,” Drut argued. — AFP