

6 Fresh world protests against racism and police violence



15 Novelist says Syrians will remain unheard



16 Fresh Lebanon protests as economic crisis spirals



20 Messi leads Barca to flying return against Mallorca



Officials linked to Bangladesh MP in visa trading scam: Saleh

MP demands names of suspects • Govt likely to ease coronavirus restrictions

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh said yesterday that “officials” are involved in one of the largest trafficking in people cases operated by “an Asian expatriate”, in a clear reference to a Bangladeshi lawmaker who is under investigations by authorities. Saleh wrote on his Twitter account that “great efforts” were carried out in the past few weeks by the interior ministry leading to “uncovering one of the largest trafficking in persons and residency cases by an Asian expat”.

He said that investigations have uncovered “suspicious financial transactions that were carried out

by a network of officials in collaboration with companies which facilitated the transactions”. Authorities have arrested a Bangladeshi MP after he arrived in the country on suspicion of running large-scale visa trading operations in cooperation with Kuwaiti officials and firms.

“All those found to be involved - whether they are government officials or prominent personalities - will be interrogated by the interior ministry and will be referred to the public prosecution to complete the legal process,” the minister said. Saleh provided no details about the operations or the number of people and victims involved in the scam.

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic,

Kuwait launched a campaign against visa traders and arrested dozens of people, including police officers. “Trafficking in persons and residency is accorded top priority by the interior ministry,” said the minister, adding that efforts exerted by interior ministry officials have achieved good progress, insisting that Kuwait’s security is a red line.

MP Abdulkarim Al-Kandari yesterday demanded the names of all suspects linked to the Bangladeshi MP should be published, including government officials and MPs. Local media reported that the Bangladeshi MP has been dealing with at least two current Kuwaiti lawmakers and a former MP.

Kandari also asked the interior ministry about

the Malaysian sovereign wealth fund scam in which a number of Kuwaitis are suspected to be involved. He said that a report in the Wall Street Journal last week said the main suspect in the scam, a Malaysian businessman, was allowed entry into Kuwait in 2016 although he was wanted by Interpol. He demanded to know if this is true and who facilitated his entry.

Meanwhile, the government is expected to ease lockdown restrictions because of the coronavirus as the country moves next week into the second phase of the return to normal life. Government offices are expected to reopen but only with 30 percent capacity, the curfew will be further eased to start at

Continued on Page 16

Petra a ghost town as virus hits tourism

PETRA, Jordan: For over two millennia the ancient city of Petra has towered majestically over the Jordanian desert. Today its famed rose-red temples hewn into the rockface lie empty and silent. As the novel coronavirus spread around the world, Jordanian authorities imposed a lockdown, and the last tourists left on March 16, a day before the Hashemite kingdom closed its borders.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen this place so empty. Usually there are thousands of tourists,” said Nayef Hilalat, 42, who has worked as a guardian at the ancient archaeological site for a decade. “Every year at this time the place would be buzzing with people,” he lamented, wearing a khaki cap bearing the Jordanian flag. “Today all we can hear is the birds singing.”

One of the seven wonders of the world, and classified as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1985,

Petra was once the capital of the nomadic Nabataean Arab peoples and dates back to at least 200 years BC. With the passage of time, it has become a beacon for tourism in the country and the region. Its spectacular Al-Khazneh, or Treasury, with its stunning sandstone facade, is one of Petra’s most famous attractions, and was a location for Steven Spielberg’s 1989 movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”.

But now, the steep winding Siq path – a gorge over a kilometre long that leads into Al-Khazneh – is deserted. Gone are the tourists normally thronging the pathway on foot, or riding on donkeys or in horse-drawn carriages. Life is in limbo. Tables at the site’s cafes forlornly gather dust or are littered with forgotten plastic cups, while items like T-shirts in the souvenir shops fade in the desert sun.

The vast site, lying in a deep valley between the Red Sea, in the south, and the Dead Sea, to the north, is a ghost town. Around 200 tour guides, along with 1,500 horse and donkey owners, are out of work. It’s “a catastrophe”, said 55-year-old Naim Nawafleh, who has been a guide here for about 30 years.

Jordan welcomes some five million visitors a year, and tourism accounts for 14 percent of the

Continued on Page 16



PETRA: Nayef Hilalat guards the empty ancient city of Petra on June 1, 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. — AFP

Fears of second wave amid new China infections

BEIJING: China reported its highest daily number of new coronavirus cases in months yesterday with parts of Beijing still under lockdown, offering a second wave warning as more European countries prepare to open their borders for travel. The shock resurgence in domestic infections has rattled China, where the disease emerged late last year but had largely been tamed through severe restrictions on movement that were later emulated across the globe.

It also gives a bleak insight into the difficulties the world will face in conquering COVID-19 – even as Europe prepares for the summer holiday season after an encouraging drop in contagion, with some countries set to welcome visitors from elsewhere on the continent from today.

Of the 57 new cases logged by Chinese authorities, 36 were domestic infections in the capital, where a large wholesale food market at the center of the outbreak has been closed and nearby housing estates put under lockdown. “The meat sellers have had to close. This disease is really scary,” said a fruit and vegetable trader surnamed Sun at another central Beijing market, adding there were fewer customers than normal. Others were more sanguine. “As long as you wear a face mask, it should be fine... Anyway, I have to buy food, right?” said shopper Song Weiming.

Continued on Page 16

Delhi virus fears rise as beds run out

NEW DELHI: Ashwani Jain succumbed to the coronavirus in an ambulance as his family pleaded with several hospitals to take him in, the latest victim of the pandemic sweeping through the Indian capital and exposing a deadly shortage of hospital beds. “They don’t care whether we live or die,” said his 20-year-old daughter Kashish, whose uncle, Abhishek, sat with Ashwani in the back of the vehicle on its desperate journey across Delhi. “It won’t matter to them but I have lost my father, he

was the world to me,” she said, tears welling up as she showed a photo of him.

All of the hospitals the 45-year-old businessman’s family tried refused to admit Ashwani, even though an app set up by the city government indicated Covid-19 beds were free, Abhishek told AFP. With surging infections highlighting the precarious state of the Indian healthcare system, the death of Jain and others like him have heightened anxiety in Delhi over the growing threat.

More than 1,200 have died from the virus in the Indian capital and more than 1,000 new cases are being reported each day. Mortuaries are overflowing with bodies and cemeteries and crematorium staff say they cannot keep up with the backlog of victims.

Continued on Page 16



NEW DELHI: This photo taken on June 11, 2020 shows a man in an ambulance outside the COVID-19 coronavirus ward at the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital. — AFP

Militarization of cops stoked by Pentagon

WASHINGTON: When US police flooded the streets around the country to confront protesters two weeks ago, for many it appeared like the army had deployed, with camouflage uniforms and combat gear, heavily armored anti-mine vehicles, and high-powered assault weapons.

That’s not by accident. For years the US Defense Department has been handing its surplus equipment over

for free to police departments – and the departments, large and small, have revelled in it. Critics say it has been part of the overall militarization of the police, and helped fuel mass nationwide demonstrations against police abuse and deadly tactics that began after the May 25 killing of a handcuffed African American, George Floyd, by a Minneapolis police officer.

As soon as protests began in Minneapolis, the city’s troubled police department rolled out armored vehicles appearing more suited to Middle East battlefields. Other large cities have them too, but also small towns.

In 2013 police in Flathead County, Montana, which has 90,000 residents

Continued on Page 16



PALMDALE, California: Sheriffs block marchers from continuing down E Palmdale Boulevard after a demonstration on Saturday. — AFP

Local

Zain Group joins Hedera Governing Council to create safer, fairer, more secure internet

Kharafi: Membership provides Zain exposure to cutting-edge, secure technologies

KUWAIT: Zain Group [Kuwait Boursa, stock ticker: ZAIN], a leading mobile telecom innovator serving 49.5 million customers in eight markets across the Middle East and Africa today announces it is joining the highly innovative Hedera Governing Council.

Zain is the first company from the Middle East region to participate on the Council, joining a list of prestigious global innovators including Boeing, Deutsche Telekom, DLA Piper, FIS (WorldPay), Google, IBM, LG Electronics, Magalu, Nomura, Swirlds, Swisscom Blockchain, Tata Communications, University College London, and Wipro.

Hedera Hashgraph provides a next-generation form of distributed consensus that is faster, fairer and more secure than traditional blockchains. It offers a new way for people or organizations who do not know or trust each other to securely collaborate and transact online without the need for a trusted intermediary. Through its participation on the Hedera Council, Zain Group will gain extensive early insights into the trends and applications in the distributed ledger technology (DLT) space and will be able to assess opportunities to develop services within its own field of operation.

Hedera's vision is to create a safer, fairer, more secure internet - one in which online communities can collectively create and evolve shared worlds in cyberspace, and on which developers can build trusted applications that enable people to play games and work together. End-users will also be empowered to buy and sell goods and services safely and securely, without entrusting a central organization with their data and privacy.

As a leading regional digital lifestyle operator, Zain consistently looks to ways technology can provide new solutions to its individual and business customers while also improving its own operating efficiency. Furthermore, the Hedera Hashgraph patented technology platform addresses the universally important issue of the environment as its power usage is super-efficient, utilizing a fraction of the electricity that blockchain platforms use. This is in line with Zain Group's membership of and commitment to the Carbon Disclosure Project, which provides a reporting framework and guidance to address climate change.

Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO, Bader Al-Kharafi commented, "We feel a sense of purpose in joining the Hedera Governing Council, which has

numerous blue chip, innovation-driven organizations all interested in driving the development of blockchains and the wider DLT space, which we have already noted has phenomenal potential. Council membership provides Zain first-hand exposure to cutting-edge and secure technologies that drive innovation, e-commerce and B2B across the region."

Kharafi continued, "From our own perspective, the growing list of new services and applications we have and continue to develop in areas such as the Group API platform; mobile money and fintech; e-health; drones; the Internet of Things; and 5G all lend themselves to further enhancement through blockchain and other distributed ledger technologies. Our participation in the Council also speaks to another pillar of Zain's corporate strategy, which is to collaborate with leading industry players to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes and thereby improve the products and services we can deliver to our customers."

Hedera aims to realize its vision to create a safer, fairer, more secure internet through a focus on addressing four fundamental challenges to the adoption of public DLT - technology, security, stability, and governance. For the vision to deliver impactful results, the network needs to be governed by representatives from a broad range of market sectors and geographies, each with world-class expertise in their respective industries.

Mance Harmon, CEO of Hedera commented, "We are delighted to have Zain Group join the



Council, given the company's sound track record of innovation, and professionalism in the development and delivery of cutting-edge mobile services and applications. We believe the Council will be enriched greatly by this first organization to join us from the Middle East region, given Zain Group's eight country footprint. We hope Zain will take full advantage of the opportunity to immerse itself in hashgraph and distributed ledger technologies and gain first-hand knowledge of new technologies and use cases developed on the Hedera network."

The Hedera Governing Council's members contribute technical expertise to manage the technical roadmap, business expertise to advise on business operations, and legal expertise to help navigate the evolving regulatory environment.

In my view

Only us to blame



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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It seems that we will be dealing with COVID-19 for some time, longer than what we thought. The virus itself was very frank and straightforward from day one and warned us not to get in touch with it, and this is where its lengthy stay will be.

Countries, people and economies became tired of the situation, precautions and curfews, and authorities started to take alternative approaches as they attempted to restore normal daily life despite the presence of this very obnoxious visitor.

They started by easing curfew hours and movement and opened certain businesses though with measures and steps dictated by health authorities, while at the same time virus infections seemed to stabilize and were on the downswing. The scary part is that authorities in many countries became excited and opened up more when they saw less than 10 cases a day.

People who were virtually locked up or restricted like caged birds were released all of a sudden and could be seen everywhere with little or no protection, no social distancing and no masks - nothing to keep the virus away, and now the virus is on the upswing again. Countries that had few, mostly imported cases, now are seeing an average of 30 cases per day, many of which are domestic.

It is very important to remind that this is not the complete fault of authorities at all - maybe they bear some, but the major part falls on the public who turned a deaf ear to the instructions of the authorities and the measures they must follow once they are free to move.

So, we all must realize that it is our responsibility - we the public - to control the pandemic by heeding warnings and following what experts have told us to get a grip on the matter. Please stop blaming others and ignoring what we have done to ourselves. Authorities are responsible for providing the tools and means and we are supposed to use them and follow what we are told.

Please let us get back to our senses and resume the fight vigorously against this attack because winning a battle or two does not mean the war is won. This war is unfortunately a long and protracted one and I am afraid that it can become an ugly war of attrition if we are not careful. Please do not blame the authorities if the measures became tougher once again. It is only us to blame. May God bless us all.

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has recorded 35,920 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as of yesterday, in addition to 296 deaths. With the exception of 171 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 thousands have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 26,759 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, while there are 8,865 people receiving treatment and 23 quarantined.

Curfew

Kuwait imposed a three-week partial curfew starting May 31, as part of a five-phase plan for a gradual return to normal life, brought to a standstill by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The first phase also includes a total lockdown on Farwaniya, Khaitan, and Hawally, joining Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh which were put under lockdown earlier.

Activities to resume in first phase included home deliveries of restaurants, telecommunication companies, food retailers, companies' transportation of employees, gas stations, private clinics and car workshops. The second phase will see the curfew shortened to be between 9:00 pm and 6:00 am, while resuming work in the government and private sectors with the workforce being less than 30 percent, in addition to resumption of constructions, banking sector, malls opening for eight hours and according to special instructions, parks and pickups from restaurants.

The third phase would see an end of curfew, and health authorities would be assessing situation of areas under lockdown. It would see increase of workforce to less than 50 percent. Visits for social care homes would be allowed, reopening of hotels, resorts and hotel apartments. Taxis will be allowed to operate with only one passenger, and mosques would be allowed to perform Friday prayers.

Phase four would see an increase in workforce, restaurants would be receiving customers but with restrictions, and public transportation resumed but with distancing. All activities would resume in phase five, government and private sector returned to normal, families could gather, weddings and graduation ceremonies, health clubs and gyms to reopen, as well as cinemas and theaters.

Mosques in the so-called 'model residential areas' reopened their doors for worshippers on June 10 amid strict health precautionary measures. Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs Mohammad Al-Afasi said that mosques in commercial, markets and heavily-populated areas will remain closed for the time being. Worshippers must wear face masks, keep social distancing between queues and between worshippers must be strictly observed. Worshippers must bring their own mats so they do not get in contact with mosque carpets. Mosques will reopen five minutes before prayer time and close 10 minutes after prayer.

Earlier, Kuwait imposed a total curfew from May 10 to May 30, allowing room for people to walk out for daily exercise between 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm, and to shop at co-ops and supermarkets once every six days during the curfew hours by making an appointment through www.moci.shop. Before that, Kuwait enforced a country-wide partial curfew

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

Precautions

Kuwait halted all commercial flights until further notice, and has sent special flights to repatriate Kuwaitis back home from countries affected with the virus' spread. Kuwait took all measures to test Kuwaitis repatriated from infected areas for potential infection. Kuwait had required 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. 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. 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.

Kuwait suspended issuing entry permits and visas unless those issued through diplomatic missions. 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). During the amnesty period, individuals desiring to procure valid residencies in Kuwait and were willing to pay the fines without being subjected to investigations were allowed to pay the fines and legalize their status if they meet the required conditions.

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-Sahh: 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

Loan sharks in Kuwait exploit cash-strapped expatriates

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The closure of thousands of businesses due to the coronavirus pandemic has hit expatriates in Kuwait hard, with hundreds of thousands now out of work with no or partial salaries. To buy food, pay rent and send money to family dependent on their salaries back home, some expatriates are turning to loan sharks. Though illegal, the practice is rampant and traps many in a lifelong cycle of indebtedness.



Illicit borrowing operations flourish

Angel, 37, has two loans from illicit loan sharks in Kuwait. "I am currently paying two loan sharks here. The first time I borrowed money when my mother died last year, then this March because my company is no longer paying us," she said. Angel is currently living in the locked down area of Hawally. She said the loan was an immediate relief for her family and herself, but she doesn't know now how she will be able to repay the debt, since her company terminated her and eight others due to the shutdown.

"I asked my employer to provide me with a certificate of employment so I could get cash assistance from our embassy. He gave me the certificate plus the termination letter," Angel said. The Philippine Embassy through the Philippines Overseas Labor Office (POLO) has distributed cash assistance of around KD 60 to distressed Filipinos. "I applied for cash assistance from our government because I really need the money. But my boss said he regrets to inform me that I will be terminated because there's no way they can reopen their business soon and that he could no longer provide us a salary," she said, quoting her boss.

"From February, I don't have a salary. I begged for money to buy food, but my boss never responded to my messages - except once time to give us the termination letter," Angel said. To survive, she borrowed money and accepted relief food packs from the Philippines Embassy. "At least I received food packs from the embassy, otherwise by now I probably would've died," she added.

But her problem is not just to survive in Kuwait. Angel said she also has several mouths to feed back in the Philippines. "Since February, my family is waiting for money, but I could not send any, so at the end of March I borrowed KD 400 from a loan shark - this was my second loan," she admitted.

Angel said she has two children back in the Philippines and a sick husband. "I borrowed money from a loan shark because my family in the Philippines need to survive also, plus my two kids need to be enrolled in school, if I don't get the amount from a loan shark, they will not go to school this school year. So I borrowed money," she explained. But the problem now is how to repay the loan. "They are demanding payment monthly, but how can I give now since I have no work?" she asked.

Under the terms of her illicit KD 400 loan, Angel is required to pay back KD 110 in four consecutive months for a total of KD 440. Failure to pay the KD 110 due each month results in an additional KD 10 in interest plus KD 5 for being overdue. "Since I cannot pay KD 110 every month, I have to raise at least KD 15 every month for the interest. The same is with my other loan, so monthly I need at least KD 30 just to pay the interest," she explained.

Lucrative operation

Lita is another Filipino who borrowed large amounts from a loan shark. "I borrowed money from a loan shark because I need to buy land from a friend at my place in Bohol," she said. "I took a KD 1,000 loan from a person whose business is related to gold. She was my friend actually. Gold is her front business but behind that gold business is



a lucrative loan sharking operation. She has too many Filipino clients," Lita claimed.

"She lends you cash but also requires you to pay a processing fee of 5 percent of your total loan. I borrowed KD 1,000 - 5 percent of KD 1,000 is KD 50, so minus KD 50. It is a mandatory deduction, so I received KD 950. Not only that, since her business is of gold, you will be required, whether you like the gold or not, to get 15 percent of your cash loan in gold. Plus you are required to pay a minimum of KD 130 every month till you're done paying the KD 1,000. Failure to pay the loan shark will result in an additional fee of KD 20, but you are still required to pay KD 130 the following month," she said.

When you are approved for the loan, you will be required to go to the ministry court of their choice to secure an "authorization letter" for the gold

shop to deduct from your bank the total amount. "In my case I should pay KD 130 per month for 10 months, for a total of KD 1,300. But remember, I only received KD 800 in cash (plus KD 150 in gold) out of the KD 1,000 loan. Yes, the gold is mine, but it is not my priority. I had no choice - I needed cash," Lita said.

The loan shark takes the ATM card along with copies of the borrowers' civil ID and passport. "Agreeing to their terms and conditions means you are allowing them to withdraw the full amount from your bank salary through your ATM. It will be withdrawn by a representative of the loan shark and you will take the remaining amount in cash from them at their shop," she said. Though illegal in Kuwait, there are many such illicit borrowing operations where those in need of quick money take on outsized debts.



KUWAIT: Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah inaugurated yesterday the Fintas Health Clinic in Al-Ahmadi.

Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Award marks 20th anniversary

KUWAIT: Today marks the 20th anniversary of launching the Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah Informatics Award, which started in 2001 as the first informatics award in the Arab World.

In this regard, chairperson of the award's board of trustees Sheikha Ayeda Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah expressed her pride in responding to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's call to adapt new methodologies in the post-corona world, which will be far much different, adding that the award would continue its digital transformations to become a modern institution ready for the foreseeable future and capable of effectively managing its administrative and technical business online.

She added that the 20th anniversary is a turning point towards phase-five which would be launched online within the coming

weeks including academic informatics courses, 'Shift Al-Kuwait' competition, informatics award and other activities inspired by HH the Amir's wish to build human-based stable and sustainable economy.

"It gives us great pride this year to see that HH Sheikh Salem Al-Ali's futuristic vision when he launched the award on June 15, 2001 has become so tangible, which makes us launch this year's award on the same date; June 15, 2020 to emphasize the great role the award has played through rapid digital shifts and transformations individuals and institutions have achieved in our region, having positive impacts on education, health, finance and other disciplines during this global pandemic," she added.

Sheikha Ayeda added that the 'Shift Al-Kuwait' platform was launched to boost informatics awareness through social media

networks and that 'Tadween' was launched for Arab bloggers with the aim of preserving the Arabic language in 2013, followed by the 'Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Humanitarian Activities Platform' in 2014. "On realizing the beginning of the fourth industrial revolution, the award renewed its strategy in 2016 to enhance know-how and digital industry economies through supporting technical pioneers", she underlined.



Sheikh Salem Al-Ali

News in brief

500 plasma donations

KUWAIT: Director of the Department of Blood Transfusion Services at the Ministry of Health (MoH) Dr Reem Al-Radwan said that 500 'immune plasma units' were collected from donors who recovered from the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) since the donation started on April 8th.

Appointments

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Electricity and Water announced that people can book appointments through its website (<https://appointment.mew.gov.kw/mew/>) to process their transactions once work resumes next week.

Kuwaiti imams

KUWAIT: Minister of Justice and Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Fahad Al-Afasi announced that Kuwaiti citizens can apply for the position of Imam and muezzin from June 16 to 25.

20 flight

KUWAIT: The Directorate General of Civil Aviation announced that 20 flights departed Kuwait International Airport yesterday, carrying a total of 3,501 passengers. They included 11 flights to Egypt, seven flights to India, one flights to Qatar, and one flight to Iran.

Curfew violators

KUWAIT: Police arrested 13 Kuwaiti nationals on Saturday for violating the curfew, the Interior Ministry said. The arrests came as follow: Four in the Capital governorate, eight in Hawally, and one in Mubarak Al-Kabeer.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

Kuwait Times
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Local



KATHMANDU: Nepali migrant workers previously stranded in Kuwait due to restrictions imposed as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus arrive at the Tribhuvan International airport in Kathmandu on June 11, 2020. —AFP

Jahra police on lookout for doctor's attacker

KUWAIT: Jahra district attorney ordered the arrest and summon of an Arab man who allegedly assaulted a doctor physically and verbally, leaving him with a broken leg, Al-Anbaa reported. In this regard, security sources stressed that the suspect would be arrested shortly as he is already identified through the civil ID of his son, whom he had taken to the doctor for treatment.

Notably, Interior Ministry operations had received a report about a person dressed in traditional clothes assaulting a doctor at Northern Sulaibiya clinic. Rushing to the scene, police found that the Egyptian doctor had been brutally beaten and could not walk due to a leg bone fracture. He was rushed by ambulance to hospital.

The doctor reported that the assailant accompanied his son into the clinic where he argued with him while diagnosing his son. The suspect insulted and assaulted him before fleeing the clinic, the doctor said. Police were able through preliminary investigations and CCTV camera tape inspection to identify the suspect as a Syrian man who had accompanied his sick son to the clinic. Further investigations are in progress.



KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality workers closed 66 stores in the Capital Governorate in May for violating government procedures taken to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Kuwait, the municipality announced yesterday. Municipality workers also removed tons of debris and cleaned garbage containers during several campaigns carried out around the governorate last month, it added. —KUNA

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Local

UK, Italy showing the way on combating climate change

By British Ambassador Michael Davenport and Italian Ambassador Carlo Baldocci

The World is combating a monumental challenge in handling the coronavirus pandemic. As well as being a health crisis, it will change the face of the global economy, possibly forever. And beyond COVID-19, we face another crisis - the rapidly changing climate. Kuwait and the Gulf will feel these effects even more than other parts of the world - summers are already becoming longer and hotter and, looking further ahead, sea level rise could have a catastrophic impact on coastline cities. Food and water security are at risk.

Like many global events, the 26th annual UN climate summit or COP26 (hosted jointly by the United Kingdom and Italy), which was due to be held in Glasgow, will now take place in November 2021. Action on climate, however, cannot wait.

To avoid the most serious effects of climate change, we must reduce the amount of carbon we are putting into the

atmosphere. In 2015, at COP21, the Paris Agreement was signed with a goal of keeping the average rise of the global temperature well below 2°C. As things stand, global commitments to reduce carbon emissions are a long way off. Countries must come forward with even more ambitious targets for carbon reduction.

Between now and November 2021 we will take advantage of every international opportunity to increase ambition and mobilization, also harnessing the G20 under the Italian Presidency and the G7 under the British Presidency.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, governments will be assessing the impact on their economies and for many this will offer the opportunity for policy change and resetting strategies. We believe these should focus on supporting a clean, inclusive and resilient recovery building on the principles of the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The UK and Italy are showing the way. The UK now regularly gets more than 50 percent of its daily energy re-



British Ambassador Michael Davenport



Italian Ambassador Carlo Baldocci

quirements from low carbon sources of power production (wind, solar, nuclear). Since 1990 the UK's CO2 emissions have declined by around 38 percent, faster than any other major developed country. Italy is the second largest manufacturing country in Europe, yet has the highest gross renewable energy consumption and lowest per capita emissions in Europe. Since 1990, Italy has reduced its emissions by 17.2 percent (from 516 to 428 Mt CO2 eq.).

For Kuwait, reducing carbon emis-

sions may seem like a threat to its economic independence. But we have seen through this pandemic, coupled with a drop in the oil price, that reliance on one commodity can be a risk. Making oil production cleaner through efficiencies and diversification into other products makes economic sense to protect Kuwait from future economic shocks. Kuwait's Vision 2035 already provides a roadmap for how this can be achieved. The intention to increase renewable energy production to 15 percent of the energy mix is an im-

portant step, and there is now scope for embedding sustainable, low carbon policies to improve construction, public transport and supply chains. Impressively, the Kuwait Investment Authority has led the way in the One Planet initiative, especially on achieving convergence around an international climate standard for investments.

We will work together to ensure that the linked challenges of public health, climate change and biodiversity are addressed. The decisions we make today will either lay the foundation for sound, sustainable and inclusive growth or lock-in polluting emissions for decades and in doing so make our society and the planet more vulnerable.

As we recover, we need to protect and restore nature, reducing our exposure to deadly viruses and climate impacts. A science-led, clean and resilient recovery will create employment in the industries of the future while ensuring we address the linked challenges of public health, climate change, and biodiversity. So this crisis has presented a unique opportunity — the chance to build back better.



KUWAIT: Charity foundations distributed bread to people in need in Hawally on Friday, as the area remains under lockdown amid efforts to fight the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The campaign was carried out in cooperation with the Interior Ministry. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



Atlanta police chief resigns after officer kills black man

Truncated will: India landowner bequeaths land to elephants



SEATTLE: A banner which reads 'abolish the police' hangs from a building in an area being called the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) after the Seattle Police Department's East Precinct was vacated in Seattle, Washington. —AFP

Fresh protests against racism

Thousands march in cities around the world for a second week

PARIS: Thousands marched in cities around the world for a second week of rallies Saturday to support the US Black Lives Matter movement, but also to highlight racism and police brutality in their own countries. There were rallies in cities across Europe, with thousands demonstrating in several French cities, and clashes breaking out in Paris and Lyon. Police arrested several far-right demonstrators in London after violence when they challenged people supporting racial quality there, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson denouncing their "racist thuggery".

The weeks of historic demonstrations have been ignited by the May 25 killing of African American George Floyd by a police officer - the latest in a long line of unarmed black men being killed by white law enforcement in the US. His agonizing death as the officer knelt on his neck was filmed by bystanders and swiftly went viral, triggering fury first in the US and then around the world. The mass unrest has forced an unprecedented global conversation on the legacy of slavery, European colonialism and white violence against people of color, as well as the militarization of police in America.

Police stopped protesters in Paris Saturday from marching through the capital, firing tear gas after some demonstrators pelted them with projectiles. In the southeast city of Lyon, police used water cannons and tear gas at the end of a demonstration attended by about 2,000 people. The Paris demonstration was called by a pressure group campaigning for justice for Adama Traore, a young black man who died in police custody in 2016. Traore's sister Assa Traore called on those attending the rally to "denounce the denial of justice, denounce social, racial, police violence". She drew a direct parallel between Floyd's death in the US city of Minneapolis and that of her brother, and renewed her call for a full investigation into his killing.

Amnesty International called in a statement for "a systemic reform of police practices" in France. The rallies came at the end of a week when France's police

watchdog revealed it had received almost 1,500 complaints against officers last year - half of them for alleged violence. Interior Minister Christophe Castaner on Tuesday promised "zero tolerance" of racism in law enforcement, saying it is clear some officers "have failed in their Republican duty". Castaner's comments prompted several dozen policemen to gather with their patrol cars at Paris's Arc de Triomphe on Saturday night, throwing down their handcuffs in protest. Brut Yoann Maras, a representative from police union Alliance, told AFP: "My colleagues felt let down, abandoned by their supervising minister."



Protesters fume over racism and police brutality

'Racist thuggery'

In London, far-right protesters clashed with police in the city center after gathering to challenge people demonstrating against racism. Thousands of people defied coronavirus restrictions to assemble in and around Parliament Square, requiring a "major" policing operation, said the Metropolitan Police Service. Television footage showed some agitators throwing punches, bottles and smoke bombs at officers as well as fighting with rival protesters. Prime Minister Boris Johnson condemned the violence, saying "racist thuggery has no place on our streets".

Police said they arrested more than 100 people in the capital, and six officers suffered minor

injuries. Anti-racism protests went ahead in other British cities, including Brighton in the south and Liverpool in the north. Thousands marched in several cities across Switzerland, with the largest in Zurich, where 10,000 people turned out. Police said one officer was hurt after a few hundred hard-left activists there began throwing projectiles. They made several arrests. Earlier in the week, around 10,000 marched against racism in Geneva. In Germany, around 2,000 rallied in the southern city of Stuttgart, the DPA news agency reported. In the north, another 500 turned out in Lubeck and 250 in Hamburg. There were no reports of any trouble.

Rallies in Australia

In Australia, thousands turned out in several cities for the second weekend running, despite coronavirus restrictions. The biggest was in the Western Australian capital Perth. Many demonstrators carried signs such as "Stop deaths in custody" and "White Australia stop lying to yourselves", highlighting the deaths of more than 400 indigenous people in custody over the last three decades. Smaller protests for Aboriginal rights were held in Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory, and towns in neighboring Queensland - both regions with numerous indigenous communities.

In Asia, hundreds gathered in a Taipei park with some holding signs with slogans such as "This is a movement, not a moment". They held eight minutes of silence to remember Floyd, who was pinned to the ground by the white officer's knee on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds. Dozens also marched through the rain in Tokyo. In Canada, officials in the eastern province of New Brunswick announced Saturday that they had opened an investigation into the fatal police shooting of a 48-year-old indigenous man, the second such incident this month. And in the US the anger was refreshed after yet another black man was shot dead by police, this time in the city of Atlanta on Friday evening. The city's police chief resigned Saturday. —AFP



This aerial photo shows rescuers searching for survivors in a building damaged by a tanker explosion near Wenling, in China's eastern Zhejiang province. —AFP

Slight coronavirus spikes may get out of control in US

WASHINGTON: The top US infectious disease official has cautioned that the "blips" of rising coronavirus hospitalizations being reported by some states could get out of control if robust contact tracing regimes are not put in place. As restrictions on economic activity are lifted, the United States was bound to see increased infections, Anthony Fauci told CNN. "But when you start seeing more hospitalizations, that's a sure fire sign that you're in a situation where you're going in the wrong direction," Fauci said.

So far, more than 114,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the United States, according to a Reuters tally. About half a dozen US states are grappling with a rising number of coronavirus patients filling hospital beds. Texas and North Carolina on Friday reported their highest hospitalization rates since the pandemic began. But officials in both states point out they also have among the lowest rates of deaths from COVID-19. Fauci underscored that increased hospitalizations was a worrying trend, however, and a sign that "maybe we need to slow down a little" on reopenings.

North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper said on Friday that while his state's rise in hospitalizations and new cases was sobering, moving ahead with more reopenings was not off the table. Texas has been at the forefront of states' efforts to reopen their economies and Governor Greg Abbott on Friday said in an interview with KYTX TV it would remain that way "because we have so many hospital beds available to anybody who gets ill." "For every person in a hospital bed, there are 10 open, available hospital beds available for them," Abbott said. "So there's plenty of hospital capacity to be able to deal with COVID-19."

He added that there is "no real need to ratchet back the opening of businesses in the state." A handful of states and cities have paused or slowed reopenings. Oregon Governor Kate Brown said she would put county applications to reopen on hold after the state reported a record daily rise in new coronavirus cases on Thursday. "This is essentially a statewide 'yellow light,' it's time to press pause for one week before any further reopening," Brown, a Democrat, said in a statement. Utah's Republican Governor Gary Herbert on Friday ordered most of the state to halt reopening while it investigated a jump in cases. "I don't want to go forward and then take a step backward," Herbert said of the order that remains in effect until June 26. —Reuters

Death toll rises to 18 in China tanker blast

BEIJING: The number of people killed in a tanker truck explosion on a highway in eastern China has climbed to 18, with nearly 200 more injured, local authorities said yesterday. The force of the blast on Saturday afternoon caused nearby homes and factories to collapse, and sent huge clouds of black smoke billowing into the air as flames engulfed several cars. China's emergency management department said Sunday morning there were 189 injured people still being treated in hospital, after the accident near Wenling city in the eastern province of

Zhejiang. Local authorities said the truck was loaded with liquefied gas.

Dramatic video footage of the accident published by state media showed a huge ball of fire shooting into the air as people screamed. In one clip, a large piece of debris is seen flying into the air before crashing on some nearby buildings. Another video showed the remains of the tanker and several truck tyres smashed into a building, which had been reduced to rubble. State news agency Xinhua reported Sunday that there was a second blast when the truck fell onto a workshop near the expressway after the first explosion. Emergency responders were still conducting search and rescue operations, it added. Deadly road accidents are common in China, where traffic regulations are often flouted or not enforced. Last year, at least 36 people died and 36 others were hurt in eastern China when a packed coach with a flat tyre collided with a truck. —AFP

International

Uncertainty as Spain puts virus death toll 'on hold'

PM accused of hiding the real number of fatalities

MADRID: For days now, Spain's daily coronavirus death toll has been on hold, generating widespread uncertainty about the real state of the epidemic that has claimed more than 27,000 lives. The health ministry's emergencies coordinator Fernando Simon, who for months has given a daily briefing on the pandemic's evolution, acknowledged the "astonishment" and "confusion" generated by the figures.

On May 25, the ministry changed its method of collecting data on confirmed cases and fatalities, initially giving a daily death toll of between 50 and 100. But the figure then fell to fewer than five per day and on some days there were no deaths at all. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez even told parliament there had been "no deaths" for several days, prompting a backlash from the right and the far-right who have since accused him of hiding the real number of fatalities. "(The) biggest danger is communicating this idea that the epidemic is over because the virus is still present in our country although at much lower levels," warned Salvador Macip, an expert in health sciences at Catalonia's Open University.

Stuck at 27,136

Simon has said the new system was set up to facilitate the rapid detection and isolation of any new outbreak and that the regions must provide a detailed breakdown of cases, rather than lumping all figures together. But last week he acknowledged that the overall number of deaths had remained "frozen" as a result of discrepancies in the figures, which he put down to delays in submitting data in certain regional areas. Since June 7, the number of dead has stuck at 27,136 while the regional authorities "review the information on deaths.. (until) they can give a

precise death date which will give a clearer sequence," Simon said.

But some regions have hit back, insisting they have submitted all the required data yet saying it wasn't reflected in the overall balance. Such was the case with Andalusia whose health minister Jesus Aguirre recently lashed out at the central government's "total lack of respect for the dead" in publishing lower figures than those submitted by the southern region itself. One problem with the new system is that it puts "excessive emphasis on reporting the previous day's figures" because if the data arrive after the deadline,



Epidemic claims over 27,000 lives

they're not added to the daily total, explained Kiko Llaneras, a data analyst with El Pais newspaper. It has turned into "a source of huge disinformation" and in terms of communication it has "tainted the entire debate", he said.

'Not communicating clearly'

The situation became even more chaotic this week after the National Statistics Institute (INE) and the Carlos III Health Institute published figures showing



SAN SEBASTIAN: Two people (left) wear a face mask for the hearing-impaired in the Spanish Basque city of San Sebastian. Today, more than 70 percent of Spain's 47 million population will be in the final stage of the phased rollback that should finish by June 21 in a country badly hit by the epidemic that has killed more than 27,000 people. — AFP

that Spain's death toll has been between 43,000 and 44,000 higher than it has been on average in recent years. And this "excess mortality" has further inflamed the opposition who point to it as proof the government is playing down the death toll. But the government has rejected such claims, saying such figures include those who died of other causes or had COVID symptoms and never had a PCR test.

Such testing kits, which were very scarce at the start of the outbreak, have since become essential for confirming a new case and adding it to the overall fig-

ures. "It is normal that the death toll does not coincide with the excess mortality figures," explained Ildefonso Hernández, spokesman for the Spanish Society of Public Health, saying similar situations occur during flu season and heatwaves. "Is the government hiding deaths under the carpet? No it's not. Is the government communicating clearly? No, it's not doing that either," he complained. "One of the fundamental issues is that the management of information and communicating figures in the epidemic has not been clear enough," agreed Llaneras. — AFP

Indonesian police battle wave of 'body snatching' by grieving relatives

MAKASSAR: Indonesian hospitals are beefing up security at their morgues after a spate of body-snatchings by relatives seeking traditional burials for family members who died of COVID-19, police said Friday. Under new rules in the sprawling archipelago, COVID-19 victims must be wrapped in plastic and buried quickly to prevent the virus spreading, meaning grieving relatives are unable to follow Muslim funeral practices, which include washing the dead from head to toe.

Families in the Muslim-majority nation have also been urged not to linger at cemeteries, robbing them of the chance to perform prayers for loved ones. Large groups of distraught relatives descended on several hospitals in Makassar on Sulawesi island this week, with some managing to forcefully take away bodies set to be buried under the virus protocols, according to authorities. At least 33 people were arrested, said local police spokesman Ibrahim Tompo, who added they faced up to seven years in prison for violating health quarantine regulations. In response, Makassar authorities have deployed more

personnel to guard local hospitals, Tompo said.

Rumors that some victims of the slated for a quick burial had died of

unrelated illnesses had exacerbated the situation, Tompo added. "This angered the families and locals so they decided to forcefully take the bodies home." In Surabaya, Indonesia's second biggest city, authorities said Friday that they had arrested four people after relatives grabbed the body of a suspected virus victim from a local hospital. Also this week, dozens of people snatched the corpse of a man who died at hospital

in Bekasi, a city that borders the capital Jakarta, police said. Citing the interrogation of one suspect, police said the man took to snatching his relative because he had died before test results were available. They later confirmed he had the virus. Officially, Indonesia has more than 35,000 cases of COVID-19 and 2,000 deaths. But with low testing rates, the real toll is widely believed to be much higher. — AFP



MAKASSAR: A villager stands next to a banner readings their rejection to the rapid test for their community members amid concern of the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Makassar, South Sulawesi. Dozens of Indonesians have been arrested for snatching COVID-19 victims from hospitals in a bid to bury them according to local customs in the Muslim majority nation. — AFP

Nepal's parliament vote steps up border friction with India

KATHMANDU: Nepal's lower house of parliament on Saturday approved a new national emblem with a controversial political map that includes strategic territories disputed with its giant neighbour India. With relations between the two strained by their frontier squabble, India quickly hit back saying the action was "not tenable". The two have been wrangling since India last month opened a new 80-kilometre (50-mile) road in Uttarakhand state leading up to the disputed Lipu Lekh pass.

Nepal condemned the move and its cabinet decided to publish a new political map that includes Lipu Lekh and contested zones in Kalapani and Limpiyadhura. An amendment bill for a revised national emblem to include the new map was passed by the House of Representatives on Saturday. Speaker Agni Prasad Sapkota said there were no votes against. The amendment will have to be endorsed by the National Assembly and the president before it is implemented. The neighbors are wrangling over a region of more than 300 square kilometers (115 square miles) where the Nepali and Indian borders touch China. Nepal claims the Lipu Lekh under an 1816 treaty that sets the boundary with India along the Kali River. Disputes have arisen because neither side can agree its source.

Nepal claims the adjoining Kalapani region even though Indian troops have been deployed there since India and China fought a border war in 1962. Nepal has since deployed security forces close to Kalapani. Nepal and India have agreed



KATHMANDU: Protesters hold a banner with a new map during a demonstration against the government's handling of the fight against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Kathmandu. — AFP

to hold talks on the dispute but Kathmandu says its neighbor will not set a date. "We are available for talks," Minister for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Shiva Maya Tumbahangphe told parliament. Following Saturday's vote, India's foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said: "The artificial enlargement of claims is not based

on historical fact or evidence and is not tenable. "It is also violative of our current understanding to hold talks." Nepal reacted angrily last month after Indian army chief General M.M. Naravane commented that Nepal's reaction might have been "at the behest of someone else", hinting at China's involvement. — AFP

Militants kill 20 soldiers, 40 civilians in northeast Nigeria attacks

MAIDUGURI: Islamic militants killed at least 20 soldiers and more than 40 civilians and injured hundreds in twin attacks in northeast Nigeria's Borno state on Saturday, residents and a civilian task force fighter said. The attacks, in the Monguno and Nganzai local government areas, came just days after militants killed at least 69 people in a raid on a village in a third area, Gubio. Two humanitarian workers and three residents told Reuters that militants armed with heavy weaponry including rocket launchers arrived in Monguno, a hub for international non-governmental organizations, at roughly 11 a.m. local time. They overran government forces, taking some casualties but killing at least 20 soldiers and roaming the area for three hours.

The sources said hundreds of civilians were injured in the crossfire, overwhelming the local hospital and forcing some of the injured to lay outside the facility awaiting help. The sources said the militants also set fire to the local police station and burned down the United Nations' humanitarian hub in the area, although a UN spokesperson said the facility sustained only light damage. Fighters distributed letters to residents, in the local Hausa language, warning them not to work with the military, white Christian westerners or other "non-believers".

Militants also entered Nganzai at about the same time on Saturday, according to two residents and one Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) fighter. They arrived on motorcycles and in pickup trucks and killed more than 40 residents, the sources said. A military spokesman did not answer calls for comment on the attacks. UN officials could not immediately be reached for comment. Boko Haram and its offshoot, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have killed thousands and displaced millions in northeastern Nigeria. ISWAP claimed the two Saturday attacks, and the Gubio attack. — Reuters

Chile's minister resigns as pandemic hits hard

SANTIAGO: Chile's health minister resigned Saturday amid controversy over the country's official coronavirus death toll, as the pandemic hits the nation hard despite quarantine measures in the capital for more than a month. The departure of Jaime Manalich was announced by President Sebastian Pinera. The government has said publicly that the health crisis has claimed more than 3,000 lives since the first case emerged in Chile on March 3. A report Saturday, however, revealed that Chile had informed the World Health Organization (WHO) that the death toll was actually more than 5,000. The report came from an investigative journalism organization called CIPER which obtained a copy of the health ministry documents sent to the WHO.

Manalich had faced mounting criticism over the way the health ministry tallies COVID-19 deaths. Deputy Health Minister Paula Daza explained the difference in the numbers. She said the higher figure presented to WHO includes both confirmed and suspected COVID-19 deaths, while the government's daily report reflects only those cases confirmed by a test based on a nasal swab. On Friday, Chile reported a record for new infections and deaths over a 24-hour period — 6,754 and 222, respectively. "The situation in our country continues to rise, above all in the metropolitan region," health ministry official Arturo Zuniga said Friday.

Infections have risen steadily in Chile even though it began taking emergency measures in February - including widespread testing and the closure of borders and schools - making it one of the first Latin American countries to do so. The capital Santiago and its seven million people were placed on lockdown more than a month ago; they were joined on Friday by the cities of Valparaiso and Vina del Mar. Nearly half of Chile's population of 18 million is now under strict confinement. The country initially had imposed selective quarantines on areas with high incidence of the coronavirus. But many poorer Chileans continued going to work - out of economic necessity - and a sharp resurgence in mid-May forced the government to order a strict lockdown. — AFP

International

Police torn between shame and pride for their badge

US police officers at the center of demonstrations

NEW YORK: US police officers at the center of demonstrations that have roiled the country are caught between their commitment to the job and recognition that reforms are needed to address institutional racism within their ranks. From California to Massachusetts, several officers interviewed by AFP said they were horrified by the killing of George Floyd while in police custody - a tragedy that sparked nationwide protests against police brutality and racism. But those interviewed also hit back at accusations that the actions of the officers involved in Floyd's death reflected the values of law enforcement officers across the country. "I am not Derek Chauvin... He killed someone. We didn't. We are restrained," Michael O'Meara, head of New York state's Police Benevolent Association, angrily said this week at a press conference. Chauvin is the officer who pressed his knee on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes. "Everybody's trying to shame us into being embarrassed about our profession," O'Meara added. "Stop treating us like animals and dogs and start treating us with some respect."

Shaun Willoughby, president of the Albuquerque Police Officers' Association in New Mexico, said Chauvin had clearly committed a criminal act that all police officers were ashamed of and it was unfair to paint everyone in uniform with the same brush. "I feel discriminated against, so do my officers," he told AFP. "We're just out here trying to do the best job that we can to protect our community and provide for our families, and now because I wear a badge I'm a problem of systemic racism in the country. "Law enforcement all over the country gets left holding the bag for the actions of a criminal in Minneapolis," he added. Experts however say that Floyd's death was not an isolated incident but added to long-running

anger and distrust of police officers among America's black communities.

'Happening far too often'

"There is a long American history of harm and violence imposed on black Americans under color of law that policing as an institution has to acknowledge," said Louisa Aviles, director of group violence intervention at the National Network for Safe Communities. Franklin Zimring, a law professor at the University of California, Berkeley and author of

“ I am not Derek Chauvin... He killed someone. We didn't ”

"When Police Kill," noted that officers in the US on average kill three people a day. "At least half of those killings are not necessary to preserve the police officers' lives or anybody else's," he said.

African Americans represent the majority of those killed with studies showing that one in every 1,000 black men in the US will die at the hands of police. "It's happening far too often, scenes where black people and people of color in general are dying at the hands of law enforcement, usually for really minor offenses," said Ben Kelso, president of the San Diego chapter of the National Black Police Association. "We spend a lot of

hours on what they call 'perishable skills,' which is driving and shooting and arresting people and things like that," he added. "But we don't spend as much time on just learning to talk to people. Because when it's all said and done, the biggest weapon police officers have every day is their mouth."

A growing list of police departments across the United States have already imposed a ban on neck restraints similar to the one that killed Floyd and reinforced disciplinary measures. Steps are also being taken at the federal level to carry out reforms. O'Meara, whose union represents some 40,000 police officers, said it was essential that law enforcement be included in the conversation as stakeholders. "This perception that we are racist dogs, that's not what we are," he told AFP. "That's not what the overwhelming vast majority of police officers are." Branville Bard Jr, chief of police in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said as a black man he has often fallen victim to racism and was in favor of tougher sanctions against bad officers.

"I can't tell you how many times I'm pulled over," he said. "And I identify myself... and it never escalates. But I'm always in fear that it could because I carry a gun and black skin at the same time." But some in law enforcement say they are being used as scapegoats for larger problems in society and reject growing calls to defund the police. "It's ironic and it's hurtful because we're out every day trying to serve and protect the public and there are millions of interactions every day with police and the public that are positive," said a 34-year-old New York officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity since he was not authorized to make public comments. "We try to be everything to everyone and we're stretched too thin and that's when mistakes are made." —AFP



CHICAGO: Chicago police officers on bikes follow crowds during a protest on June 13, 2020 in Chicago, Illinois. Protests erupted across the nation after George Floyd died in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25th. —AFP

100 years on, US pardons black man accused of rape

WASHINGTON: On June 15, 1920, three African-Americans were lynched in Duluth, Minnesota, accused without proof of raping a white woman. One hundred years later, the northern US state on Friday pardoned another black man convicted of the crime, which he repeatedly denied committing. Max Mason, who died in 1942, has become the first person to benefit from a posthumous pardon in Minnesota, a potent symbolic action at a time when Americans are confronting the roots of a racism that still taints substantial portions of society.

The pardon request was filed well before the May 25 death of George Floyd, a handcuffed black man who died when a white Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes. The killing, caught on video, triggered coast-to-coast protests, making the Mason pardon timely. "100 years late, overdue justice has been done," Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison said on Twitter. "The last weeks in MN have shown us we have a need for a better quality of justice. A pardon for Max Mason is another long-delayed step toward it."

On June 14 of 1920, young white woman Irene Tusken and a male friend attended the circus in Duluth. The next day, the man told his father they had been attacked by black circus troupe members and that Tusken was raped. Police rounded up and interrogated several black men including Mason, but the couple was unable to identify anyone as one of the attackers. According to court documents, a doctor examined the woman but could find no evidence of assault. Mason was released, and he rejoined the traveling circus as it departed Duluth. But police re-arrested him along with several other men.

Later that night, an angry mob broke into the police station and grabbed three men, dragging them through the streets before hanging them in front of thousands of people. Duluth is the home town of famed folk singer Bob Dylan, whose 1965 song "Desolation Row" was written in part about the crime. The city has apologized for the lynching and in 2003 erected a memorial to the three victims. Mason escaped the fate of those three men. But he was sentenced to 30 years in prison, in part because it was learned that he and Tusken were both infected with gonorrhea, a common venereal disease. "If he had been a white man, I am rather doubtful if he would have been convicted," county attorney Mason Forbes said in 1923 pardon request. —AFP

Truncated will: India landowner bequeaths land to elephants

PATNA: An Indian landowner has willed most of his land to two elephants he said saved his life from gun-toting criminals, a decision that has upset his wife and children. Akhtar Imam, from a village in the eastern state of Bihar, said he changed his will to bequeath 2.5 hectares (6.2 acres) to gentle giants Moti (pearl) and Rani (queen). "I simply don't want hardship for my Moti and Rani, who are no less my family," Imam, 50, told AFP as his bathed the pachyderms on a swelteringly hot day. "I don't want my elephants to face the fate of orphaned or abandoned captive elephants who die on the streets or in deserted fields due to lack of proper care." Imam, who runs a wildlife trust, raised Moti, aged 20, and Rani, aged 15, from when they were born to another domesticated jumbo that has since died.

Each elephant has two staff looking after them day and night, and roam his property freely. He said his love for the pair grew even more when they saved him from "gun-carrying criminals" who he said tried to kill him last year while he slept. "When I opened my door to see why the elephants were trumpeting, I saw they were chasing criminals nearby," he said. "I am alive due to my elephants who had worked like bodyguards to me." —AFP

Atlanta police chief resigns after officer kills black man

WASHINGTON: The police chief in the US city of Atlanta resigned after an officer fatally shot a black man during an arrest, the mayor said Saturday, with the new killing injecting fresh anger into protests against racism and police brutality. Images on local media showed hundreds of protesters in the streets on Saturday and flames engulfing the Wendy's restaurant where 27-year-old Rayshard Brooks was killed. The officer who shot Brooks was dismissed Saturday and identified by Atlanta police as Garrett Rolfe. The second officer was placed on administrative duty, according to ABC News.

Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms - who has been touted as a potential running mate for Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden - earlier announced the resignation of Chief Erika Shields. Wendy's employees called police on Friday night to complain that Brooks was asleep in his car and blocking other customers on the premises, an official report said. He failed a sobriety test and resisted when police tried to arrest him, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) said. Surveillance video showed "that during a physical struggle with officers, Brooks obtained one of the officer's Tasers and began to flee from the scene," the report continued. "Officers pursued Brooks on foot and during the chase, Brooks turned and pointed the Taser at the officer. The officer fired his weapon, striking Brooks," it said.

Brooks was taken to hospital but died after surgery, it said, adding that one officer was injured. An attorney acting for the dead man's family said disproportionate force was used in the confrontation. "In Georgia a Taser is not a deadly weapon — that's the law," L. Chris Stewart told reporters. "Support came, in I think

George Floyd's death prompts soul-searching

WASHINGTON: Confederate monuments are coming down and statues of Christopher Columbus are being toppled as Americans grapple with the ghosts of the country's racial history in the wake of George Floyd's death. "It seems like maybe we've hit a tipping point in the retelling of the narrative of who we are as an American people," said David Farber, a history professor at the University of Kansas. "We're seeing tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of Americans wrestling with fundamental questions of what do we do with the unsavory - and, let's be frank, even immoral - aspects of our past." The May 25 killing of Floyd, an African American, by a white police officer in Minneapolis has ignited mass protests for racial justice and police reform across the United States.

But the death of the 46-year-old has also triggered a national soul-searching of the country's checkered past. Demonstrators in several US cities have targeted monuments to generals and politicians of the pro-slavery Civil War South, pulling down a statue in Richmond, for example, of Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president during the 1861-1865 conflict. "The symbols of the Confederacy are, I think, the most polarizing of these memorials. But it extends all over the United States," Farber said. "In New York it's statues to Columbus. In New Mexico, there's a statue of a conquistador who's a genocidal figure in the eyes of the Pueblo Indian people. "There's high schools all over the United States named for John Calhoun," a former vice president who was an avowed proponent of slavery.



CALIFORNIA: People gather during a vigil around a makeshift memorial at the tree where Robert Fuller was found dead outside Palmdale City Hall on June 13, 2020, to demand a full investigation into the death of Robert Fuller, a 24-year-old black man found hanging from a tree, in Palmdale, California. —AFP

2 minutes. He would have been boxed in and trapped. Why did you have to kill him?" "The officer) had other options than shooting a man in the back." Brooks has four children, Stewart added, and had celebrated the birthday of his eight-year-old girl earlier on Friday. His death is the 48th shooting involving an officer the GBI has been asked to investigate this year, according to local newspaper the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Fifteen of those incidents were fatal.

The unrest comes as the US faces a historic reckoning on systemic racism, with mass civil unrest ignited by the May 25 killing of another African-American man, George Floyd, while in police cus-

'Public outcry'

Farber noted that the debate over Confederate memorials has been going on for years and civil rights marchers of the 1950s and 1960s decried the fact that they were "walking down streets named after avowed racists and white supremacists." The efforts to remove Confederate monuments gathered momentum after a white supremacist shot dead nine African Americans at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. "The pace of it is now increasing because of public demand and public outcry," said Andra Gillespie, an associate professor of political science at Emory University. "What I think we're seeing is a reexamination of lots of our assumptions and a challenging of various forms of history as it affects African Americans," Gillespie said. "This is a moment where the focus is on anti-black racism but it is not excluding other forms of racial oppression," she said. Laura Edwards, a Duke University history professor, said "it's sinking in to people that these symbols have political meaning and are problematic in ways they had not fully appreciated. "It's less easy to call this heritage, for instance," Edwards said in a reference to arguments often used by opponents of removing Confederate symbols who claim it is erasing a proud Southern history. Edwards said she was "blown away" when the NASCAR race car franchise banned the display of the Confederate flag at its events. "Amongst all the sports it was the one that embraced what they imagined to be white Southern heritage," she said. "Symbols associated with white supremacy and the Confederacy had been part of their brand."

'Broader reckoning'

The toppling of Confederate statues and those of Columbus are "very much related," Edwards said, in that both embody the "violent colonization of the United States." "The first part was Europeans coming and making claims to a place that belonged to indigenous people and then engaging in genocide to wipe



LOS ANGELES: Photo shows an aerial view of Hollywood Boulevard painted with the words 'Black Lives Matter' as protests continue in the wake of George Floyd's death on June 13, 2020 in Los Angeles, California. —AFP

them away." That was followed by the importation of slaves from Africa — what Alan Kraut, a history professor at American University, called "the original sin that we've never been able to get beyond." —AFP

Business

MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2020

10 Gulf Bank holds first virtual training program for employees



10 Virus crisis puts Nigeria fuel subsidy system in spotlight



11 EU, IMF urged to show courage to rescue ailing Italian economy



BEIJING: Two women wearing face masks walk past a mall in Beijing. China's travel ban is wreaking havoc among foreign companies and international schools, with many fearing for their future as executives, teachers and students are left stranded in their home countries.—AFP

China ban leaves global businesses in limbo

Execs, teachers and students stranded in home countries due to travel ban

BEIJING: China's coronavirus travel ban is wreaking havoc among foreign companies and international schools, with many fearing for their future as executives, teachers and students are left stranded in their home countries.

A ban on most foreigners entering the country was implemented in March as the outbreak gathered pace overseas—leaving families separated and firms struggling without key employees. Even those with valid residence or work permits, or who run businesses, have been shut out, and there was further doubt about when the restrictions would be lifted after a new cluster of infections was detected in Beijing over the weekend.

Jessie Lim, the founder of Frequency Advertising & Event, has been stranded in Singapore since travelling there in January. “(The ban) really shocked me,” she told AFP, adding that her Chengdu-based firm earned nothing in the first three months of the year as the virus put a stop to gatherings and events.

Lim had been due to return in February when a 14-day quarantine on arrivals was imposed—so she delayed in the hope that measure would be lifted. Instead, she was stunned when the ban was announced and she was unable to return at all.

Business is expected to pick up in the coming months but Lim is unable to meet clients, and worries she will suf-

fer further losses if she stays away much longer. Although China set up “fast-track” channels with some countries for key business personnel to return, the process is still complicated and requires an invitation letter and approval by the foreign ministry.



Staying away means further losses for firms

One Beijing-based Middle Eastern restaurant told AFP the founders are looking for new owners for their downtown eatery after being stranded in Israel, and were considering making the move home permanent.

St. John Moore, chairman of the British Chamber of Commerce in China, called this week for a system allowing British nationals who live in China to return with their families. “An increasing number of British businesses make China their regional hub and base executives in

China with roles across the region. In this current environment, it is not possible to continue that,” he said.

An American Chamber of Commerce survey in May found that 90 percent of 109 member companies had business operations hit by global travel disruptions, which was a top concern. More than half said being unable to return expatriate staff to China was another worry.

Joerg Wuttke, president of the EU Chamber in China added it is “recruitment season” now, when companies move as many as 100 staff members to new roles or appointments. “But it could be very difficult now (to keep workers in China) because many family members are separated... many people may just cut their stint short, go home and stay home,” he told AFP.

“How can we make China a good place to live when flights are not operating, quarantine conditions are unfavorable and it's hard to get visas?”

Classroom challenges

International schools have also seen students and teachers stranded overseas. The British Chamber's Moore said a “significant number of British teachers remain outside China”, presenting challenges for schools to resume in-person classes.

“If this is not resolved, in making China a place where international families with children can continue

to work... we will see a reduction in the attractiveness of China as a place for long-term engagement,” he said. Some parents have called for refunds on hefty tuition fees with classes unable to resume, adding to the schools' financial woes.

“The crisis happened just at the moment when we were supposed to pay the second term,” said Karim Vincent Berrada, whose child attends the French International School in Beijing, adding some parents were angry at being made to pay despite there being only online classes. International schools have made huge investments in China in recent years—hoping to tap demand from expats and wealthier Chinese families seeking an international-standard education for their children.

The number of foreign independent brand campuses has rocketed from seven in 2012 to 74 this year, according to ISC Research. International schools had already been facing challenges because of falling numbers of expats living in China in recent years.

Sam Fraser, head of field research at ISC Research, warned some schools “might not be in a position to offer refunds or discounts or bear any financial loss”. Funds for other projects may have to be put on hold if cash is redirected to keep the school running, he said, and “we think it is inevitable that some schools will be forced to close”. — AFP

French trader who bet the house on oil shock and won

LONDON: French trader and specialist oil hedge fund manager Pierre Andurand saw it coming from early February. His call—and a lucrative one at that—was that there would be a massive slump in oil prices, to the point of unprecedented negative prices for ‘black gold’.



“There is no limit to the drop in prices ... negative prices are possible,” the founder of Andurand Capital posted to Twitter on April 20.

Hours later the price of a WTI barrel slid into negative territory for the first time, having stood at \$60 in New York a few short weeks earlier, dragging Brent crude down in its wake. Simultaneously, the Andurand Capital fund was reaping returns of more than 150 percent for having correctly second-guessed the market as early as February—before the coronavirus-induced global panic saw air traffic grind to a virtual halt along with much economic activity.

It was a spectacular coup for the former Goldman Sachs trader Andurand, after he made a market bet

diametrically opposed to the one most traders had at the start of the year, when conventional wisdom said the oil price would take off.

Detailed analysis

Bloomberg recently named his firm as one of the top dozen to emerge strongest from the coronavirus crisis, in a study that found three quarters of 1,500 funds assessed had lost money on markets hit by the pandemic. “When I feel there is a big change in terms of supply and demand I analyze it in detail and I try to quantify its impact on prices,” Andurand, a 20-year finance veteran, told AFP.

“Very soon” he became convinced COVID-19 would prove “hard to stop” and that there was “a strong probability of confinement measures the world over”. The 43-year-old anticipated the chain reaction that broke over the oil market as demand collapsed, leading to giant stock surpluses—catastrophic for producers reduced to paying buyers to take supplies off their hands.

Andurand then bet on prices going back up slightly after output cutbacks. Andurand Capital manages around \$800 million across varying risk levels.

And this year was not the first time the Frenchman had beaten the house on oil. He did the same back in the 2008 financial crisis as his newly launched fund pulled off a 209.5-percent gain, followed by another 55 percent the following year.

He also made strong gains in 2014 when oil prices halved.

‘Competitive sport’

It wasn't all plain sailing. In 2012, months before he would close his first fund, things went sour—as they would again in 2018 and 2019. In those years, Andurand booked losses of between 15 and 20 percent. The son of civil servants, Andurand, from the



French oil trader Pierre Andurand —AFP

southern town of Aix, spent part of his childhood on Reunion Island before returning to mainland France where he swam for his country's junior squad.

He would later take on two former Olympic swimmers—compatriot Clement Lefert and South Africa's Cameron van der Burgh—as traders. Armed with qualifications in

applied mathematics and then finance from the HEC international business school in Paris, Andurand says he likes to dabble “a little in everything—finance, macroeconomics, psychology, mathematics, geopolitics”.

Trading is for him akin to “competitive sport—the return replacing the stopwatch”.

By 2000, he would be working for Goldman Sachs in Singapore, moving on first to Bank of America, then Dutch oil trader Vitol in London.

“That worked pretty well when I was young,” he recalls. Pretty well translates to a rumoured \$20 million bonus at the age of 27.

By 2007, he felt “sufficiently confident” to branch out on my own” and found his own firm, BlueGold, before launching Andurand Capital in 2010 right, opposite Harrods department store in London's up-market Knightsbridge district.

He ran the operation from Malta, where he set up home in 2017. He has also set up a US-based risk capital fund financing start-ups. And he runs his own kickboxing franchise, Glory Sports International staging tournaments and special one-off fights around the world. It is sport that he himself practices. — AFP

Business

Gulf Bank holds first virtual training program for employees

Employees complete 4-week program through Zoom

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank recently concluded its first remote training program for employees, which was held through the video and audio communications app, Zoom. In the face of the exceptional circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Gulf Bank has safely resumed projects across its various departments, including employee training.

The four-week training program was held for a group of 25 employees, and included a detailed overview of Gulf Bank's products, customer service, sales department, and more. Throughout the program, employees were regularly evaluated to confirm their readiness to work at the Bank's various branches and Customer Contact Center. Commenting on the virtual training program, General Manager of Human Resources at Gulf Bank Salma Al-Hajjaj said: "In these extraordi-

nary times, we are grateful to reap the value of our ongoing investment in innovation and technology. Throughout the years, we have always been determined to keep our teams up-to-date with the latest that technology has to offer, and



Gulf Bank resumes projects

take advantage of various digital tools to enhance the performance of our human resources department. Today, we are proud to be

the first bank in Kuwait to have successfully pioneered an integrated, virtual training program for our employees. In the meantime, we will continue to develop innovative ways to deal with future exceptional circumstances both professionally and positively."

Gulf Bank's virtual training program is the first of its kind that provides both practical and theoretical training for employees remotely, with a major focus on skill-building. As part of the program, employees were trained in the latest health and safety requirements set in place as a result of the pandemic, while receiving valuable practical training from employees who have been hard at work during these times. The combination of practical and theoretical training aims to prepare employees for work conditions under the pandemic, while boosting their confidence in their roles.

It is worth noting that Gulf Bank is currently welcoming customers at a select number of branches throughout the country, and is keen on applying all the necessary precautionary measures to ensure the regular sterilization of its locations. These measures include taking customers' temperatures at the entrance, maintaining physical distance, and ensuring both customers and staff are wearing gloves and masks at all times. Gulf Bank is committed to applying the best preventive health measure to ensure the safety of both its clients and staff.

To learn more about Gulf Bank's services, customers can contact the Customer Contact Center by calling 1805805 or direct their queries through the WhatsApp service on 65805805. In addition, customers can also visit www.e-gulf-bank.com for more information.



Salma Al-Hajjaj



LAGOS: Nigeria, a major oil producer, aims to end a costly fuel subsidy system which has provided a lucrative source of funds for corrupt officials and businessmen.—AFP

Virus crisis puts Nigeria fuel subsidy system in spotlight

LAGOS: Plunging oil prices and collapsing state revenues have seen Nigerian authorities vow an end to a controversial fuel subsidy scheme long criticized as a graft-ridden drain on public finances.

But there are major doubts that Africa's most populous country is finally ready to wean itself off a system that has helped some in high places syphon billions from government coffers. The fuel subsidy scheme has been described as a sprawling web of patronage and mismanagement that encapsulates the dysfunction plaguing the continental powerhouse.

Despite being Africa's largest oil producer, OPEC member Nigeria has limited refinery capacity and actually imports the bulk of its refined products, including fuel. That fuel is then sold at a subsidized rate in an opaque system aimed at keeping average Nigerians happy—but it also left plenty of scope for corruption by officials and traders.

Over the past few months the coronavirus crisis and turmoil worldwide has upended all this. The fall in global oil prices means that fuel coming in from outside no longer needs to be subsidized, just as Nigeria's state revenues have taken a major hit.

Taking advantage of the slump to save its much-needed reserves, the Nigerian authorities announced an end to the old system in April.

"There is no subsidy and it is zero forever," said Mele Kyari, the head of state-run Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). From now on, officials pledged, the market would determine the cost at the pump.

'Full deregulation'

As so often in Nigeria's murky world of big money and vested interests, not everything has turned out quite so straightforward. Despite the insistence of the authorities that the subsidy system is over, many in the industry complain the government refuses to relinquish control.

So far the authorities have continued to set a pricing band that they say retailers must stick to. "Nigerians shouldn't be overcharged, that's what we are saying," said Apollo Kimchi, spokesman for the state Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency.

"We advise marketers — this is how you sell, you shouldn't go above (this) price because if you go above it, you will be exploiting people, that's it."

For Tunji Oyeibanji, chairman of the Major Oil Marketers Association of Nigeria, official action has fallen well short of the pronouncements. "We don't really understand what the government is up to," he told AFP.

"Where are (the) market forces determining price in this?" His organization—which represents large filling station owners—has long pushed for the government to let pump prices go free.

"We maintain that a full deregulation

and liberalisation of the downstream sector is the solution," Oyeibanji said.

Vast sums

The current scrap over the fuel subsidy is just the latest tussle about change to a system that has helped some at the top grow seriously wealthy over the years. International lenders like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have long decried a scheme that swallows up vast sums that should otherwise be spent on sectors such as health or education.

President Muhammadu Buhari shook things up after his election in 2015 on a platform to tackle Nigeria's endemic graft. He took over the oil ministry and ordered state behemoth NNPC to become the sole fuel importer into the country.

The move may have cut out some of the more egregious abuses under the previous administration of president Goodluck Jonathan. But critics say putting the notoriously unaccountable NNPC in charge only made funds harder to trace and immense sums have continued to vanish into the system.

"Corruption has not disappeared under Buhari's administration, even if it is less rampant than under Goodluck Jonathan when traders became billionaires in five years," said Benjamin Auge, a researcher at the French Institute for International Relations.

'End of the system?'

Given the vast fortunes being made from the scheme many in the industry are sceptical that it can ever change. "With the crisis, the price of a barrel fell so low that there was nothing left to benefit anymore from the subsidy system," said one operator on condition of anonymity.

"But when prices go up again, won't they back off and restore the lucrative subsidies?" Some are more hopeful that the current global turmoil will hasten an end to the subsidies once and for all.

Researcher Auge said that the collapse in state revenues means that the government simply cannot afford to return to the old ways. After turning to the IMF for financial aid to weather the storm it is also going to find it harder to shrug off pressure to make genuine reforms.

And on the horizon there is anyway a major game-changer coming that could radically overhaul the market. Africa's richest man Aliko Dangote is building a gigantic refinery on the edge of economic hub Lagos which is expected eventually to handle 650,000 barrels a day.

While construction has been hit by repeated delays, including the current crisis, the facility should end up slashing the need for imports—and so for subsidies.

"This time the state doesn't have a choice," said Auge. "It is the end of the system." — AFP

Investors still see stocks as long-term bet

NEW YORK: An interruption to a searing rally gave a jolt to equity investors who had been getting used to weeks of steadily rising US stocks.

But long term, even with the rocketing valuations that equities have commanded and the risk of another fall, investors say stocks would still be a winning bet. Underpinning that confidence is the force of unprecedented moves by the Federal Reserve to support the financial system and buy assets, which had propelled some stock indexes to fresh highs. "If you're a longer-term investor, you still have to like your equities exposure more than fixed-income exposure, where you basically have no upside at this point and your earnings are your paltry yield," said Troy Gayeski, Co-CIO of SkyBridge, an alternative investments firm.

Gayeski said if stocks fall a total of 10-15 percent, he would consider skewing more to equity-centric managers.

Following a sharp rise from March lows, The S&P 500 slumped 5.9 percent on Thursday, its steepest one-session loss since March 16, after renewed fears of a new wave of coronavirus infections and gloomy economic forecasts from the US Federal Reserve. Prior to the fall, the S&P 500 had traded at 22 times expected earnings, its most expensive level since the dot-com boom.

Stocks opened sharply higher on Friday, but then lost those gains by mid-afternoon. Still, stocks look more attractive compared to bonds than at any time since the 1950s, with the S&P 500 dividend yield nearly three times the yield on the 10-year Treasury note, analysts at BofA Global Research said in a recent report.

Jack Ablin, chief investment officer at Cresset Capital Management said he is not changing his mind on his decision to add riskier assets during the early days of the crisis. "We got repositioned in risk assets back in late March, early April so that has helped us," said Ablin. "But we're content to hold for right now."

Past equity market drops of similar size have not necessarily been a precursor of more declines. The S&P 500 has averaged gains of nearly 19 percent in the year following one-day declines of 5 percent or more, according to Bespoke Investment Group. Still, for some, caution remains.

Guggenheim Partners global chief investment officer Scott Miner told CNBC on Thursday that stocks could retest their lows and that the S&P, which closed Thursday at just above 3,000, could nearly halve to 1,600. If the market rallies in coming days, he told CNBC that his biggest challenge will be whether to use the opportunity "to reduce exposure."

David Kotok, chairman and chief investment officer of Cumberland Advisors, said he sold stocks and raised cash into the rally. He has not committed any cash yet despite the sell-off.

"I don't want to catch a falling knife," he said. This week, credit spreads - the premium investors demand to hold riskier debt over safer Treasuries - have widened. The spread of the ICE/BofA investment grade and high yield credit indexes widened by 14 basis points and 89 basis points, respectively. Spreads typically widen when the perceived risk of default rises. Spreads are still far narrower than during March, when they widened to 11-year highs, but are not yet back to pre-coronavirus levels.

Monica Erickson, investment grade credit portfolio manager at DoubleLine, said she had lightened up on particularly hard-hit sectors such as travel, energy and real estate investment trusts (REITs) when equities were rallying and positions tightening. Erickson said she has not changed positioning due to Thursday's market drop.

"I think there was too much tightening in spreads too quickly and the market is now taking a breather," she said. William Zox, portfolio manager at Diamond Hill Capital Management, said he has been selling fully-valued corporate bonds in favor of higher quality but undervalued bonds such as BBB- and BB-rated regional banks. "There is still a massive amount of uncertainty that must be reflected in prices," Zox said. — Reuters



NEW YORK: In this file photo a Wall Street sign near the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) is seen in New York City. — AFP

World shares higher as investors mull recovery outlook

NEW YORK: Global equity markets rose in choppy trading on Friday as concerns triggered by the US Federal Reserve's less-than-optimistic outlook for an economic recovery and a jump in US coronavirus cases gave investors pause.

The three major US stock indexes rose by at least 1 percent, a day after the market's worst single-day drop in three months. MSCI's gauge of stocks across the globe gained 0.34 percent.

Spot gold prices rose as investors bought the safe-haven metal, with bullion heading toward its biggest gain since the week of April 10. Meanwhile, oil prices fell for the first time in seven weeks. Spot gold added 0.3 percent to \$1,731.81 an ounce. US gold futures settled down 0.1 percent at \$1,737.30.

Rich Meckler, partner at New Jersey-based Cherry Lane Investments, said Friday's upswing indicated some investors are returning the markets, despite broad uncertainties about the economic recovery and future of the coronavirus pandemic.

"You could make the case that next year this time everything is back to normal, and you can make the case that it's multiple years before we get back on path, and that's what investors have been fighting," over the past few days, Meckler said.

Worldwide health officials expressed concerns this week that countries, grappling with the devastating economic impact of lockdowns meant to stem coronavirus's spread, are lifting restrictions too swiftly and risking a resurgence in cases.

Earlier this week, the Fed predicted a

6.5 percent decline in US output this year and said an economic recovery is some time off.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 477.37 points, or 1.9 percent, to 25,605.54, the S&P 500 gained 39.21 points, or 1.31 percent, to 3,041.31 and the Nasdaq Composite added 96.08 points, or 1.01 percent, to 9,588.81. Despite that, all three major indexes suffered their biggest weekly percentage declines since the week ended March 20.

In Europe, the STOXX 600 Index snapped a four-day losing streak to rise 0.28 percent. Frankfurt's DAX, Paris's CAC40 and London's FTSE were all in positive territory, the latter shrugging off data showing Britain's economy shrank the most on record in April.

Spot gold rose 0.2 percent to \$1,730.19 per ounce by 4:48 pm EDT (1810 GMT), up about 2.7 percent so this week. US crude oil futures settled at \$36.26 a barrel, down 8 cents or 0.22 percent. Brent crude futures settled at \$38.73 a barrel, up 18 cents or 0.47 percent. The three major US stock indexes posted their worst day on Thursday since mid-March, when markets were sent into free-fall by the abrupt economic lockdowns put in place to contain the pandemic.

In currencies, the pound shed early gains against the dollar after 10 consecutive days of gains. Sterling was last trading at \$1.2519, down 0.64 percent. The dollar index rose 0.286 percent. The euro down 0.39 percent to \$1.1253. US Treasury yields rose as stocks clawed back some ground. The 10-year US Treasury yield rose to 0.7067 percent. — Reuters



The field center of the Johan Sverdrup oil field in the North Sea west of Stavanger, Norway. — Reuters

Norway lawmakers to weigh new wealth fund head

OSLO: Norwegian lawmakers will scrutinize the appointment of hedge fund veteran Nicolai Tangen as head of Norway's \$1 trillion sovereign wealth fund, the opposition Labour Party said.

Norges Bank said in March that Tangen would take over the running of Norway's \$1 trillion rainy day fund from September, while putting his own 43 percent stake in London-based AKO Capital into a blind trust.

The Norwegian sovereign fund, the world's largest, owns about 1.5 percent of all listed global equities and is worth three times Norway's annual gross domestic product, making its investment returns vital to the country's economy.

Deputy Labour leader Hadia Tajik told the NTB news agency on Friday that the Norwegian parliament's finance committee will hold a hearing in August to investigate the hiring process.

The hearing was prompted by a letter from the central bank's supervisory board to parliament, reiterating concerns first raised last month with regards to Chinese walls between Tangen's new role and his business interests. In a statement, the cen-

tral bank again said conflicts of interest had been prevented.

"The employment contract creates sufficient distance between Nicolai Tangen's private finances, the AKO system and the job that he will carry out as CEO," Olsen said. On Friday, following news of the hearing, the central bank said it would testify before the committee.

"Norges Bank is of course prepared to give any clarifications to parliament regarding the hiring," a spokesman for the bank said.

Norwegian central bank governor Oeystein Olsen has said Tangen's employment contract creates sufficient distance between his interests and the fund, and that the relevant mechanisms for managing the situation will be in place by the time he starts. Tangen's surprise appointment thrust the 53-year-old, whose private wealth is estimated at more than \$500 million, into the limelight in Norway.

Overturning his appointment would likely require the government to replace Olsen and others on the central bank's executive board, which was unanimous in choosing Tangen. — Reuters

Business

EU, IMF urged to show courage to rescue ailing Italian economy

Italian economy is expected to contract by 8.3% in 2020

ROME: Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte called Saturday for a “courageous plan” in launching virtual talks with EU and IMF leaders to rescue Italy’s economy and society from the “unprecedented shock” triggered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Conte said the plan was needed to surmount the nation’s crisis as Italian opposition figures shunned the hastily organized and roundly criticized emergency talks—and as reports emerged of new virus cases in Rome. European Union leaders “must show that they have understood that it is about defending mutual interests,” Conte said in an opening speech transmitted to leading executives in Brussels.

“We are in the process of living an unprecedented shock with very high human, social and economic costs,” said Conte, whose country had recorded 34,301 coronavirus deaths to Saturday—one of the worst tolls in Europe.

The EU’s third largest economy is expected to contract by at least 8.3 percent in 2020, under the most optimistic official estimate. To stimulate activity in EU countries most affected by the COVID-19 crisis, the European Commission has proposed a 750-billion-euro (\$847-billion) recovery plan — 500 billion euros in grants and 250 billion euros in loans.

Italy is expected to receive around 172 billion euros of this sum. “We must also take advantage of (the moment) to transform the crisis into an opportunity to eliminate all the obstacles that slowed (the country) down for the last 20 years,” Conte said.

He said he shared European Commission Presi-

dent Ursula von der Leyen’s view that “we cannot allow ourselves to return to the pre-crisis status quo”.

The talks venue is a 17th century palace, the Casino del Bel Respiro, which Conte called a rare choice “to pay tribute to Italian beauty”. Participating remotely were Von der Leyen, the EU’s economic affairs commissioner Paolo Gentiloni, European Council President Charles Michel, as well as International Monetary Fund director Kristalina Georgieva, a Bulgarian who previously served on the European Commission, the EU executive.

“This is the moment for you to develop and implement an effective recovery plan,” Von der Leyen said, adding the Commission will support Italy until recovery. Michel said that “by reinforcing Italy, we are also reinforcing Europe.”

“We must not forget,” he added, “Italy’s sacrifice probably indirectly saved lives in the rest of Europe”. Italy was hit with the virus before it reached most of its neighbors.

Although his approval ratings rose during the coronavirus emergency, Conte faces questions from prosecutors over his handling of the pandemic and now confronts political challenges over the threat of deep recession. Conte has suggested a task force headed by former Vodafone chief executive Vittorio Colao to come up with recommendations on how to get Italy’s economy back on track.

Conte said last week he wanted to unite “the country’s strongest forces” and compile the “most effective ideas” for an economic rebound following

sense because market participants had been complacent in view of ongoing Brexit risks and the coronavirus-induced economic slump. “Little progress has been made on Brexit ... the UK economy is going to lag the rest of the developed markets, so levels at \$1.27-\$1.28 were a bit of a stretch for sterling,” he said. Britain’s economy shrank by a quarter over March and April, data showed on Friday. Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey said the central bank had to be ready to do more to help. The country has also made very little headway in talks about a future trade relationship with the European Union, negotiators have said, and it confirmed on Friday it would not extend a Brexit transition period that is due to end on Jan. 1.

Asset manager Candriam told clients that it expected “further depreciation” of the pound, as their view on Britain was negative given its performance in managing the COVID-19 crisis and a lack of progress in sealing a deal with the EU.

“This all alongside a massive fiscal deficit, inflated debt to GDP and a current account deficit which re-



ROME: Italy’s Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte (fourth left) attending, along with members of the Italian government, a video conference with EU and IMF leaders from Villa Pamphili in Rome, as the country eases its lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 infection.—AFP

quires financing,” Candriam said. From next week, much of Britain’s retail sector is authorized to reopen as long as shops follow social distancing rules. — Reuters

Reports of new cases in Rome—at a hospital and a building inhabited by squatters—only added to Italian concerns on Saturday with five fatalities and more than 100 people affected, health officials said.

Regional director of health Alessio d’Amato said

104 cases had been logged after an outbreak at the San Raffaele Pisana hospital in the west side of Rome, adding some 200 recent patients would have to be tested. Amato said the cluster was under control but that authorities were remaining highly vigilant. A further cluster of nine cases, who were hospitalized, was uncovered at a squatted block of flats in the southern district of Garbatella, regional health authorities said.

The building’s remaining residents—many of them immigrants—were quarantined while La Repubblica newspaper put cases at the block at 17. —AFP

Sterling sheds gains vs dollar

LONDON: The pound shed early gains against a weaker dollar on Friday to be 0.6 percent lower on the day as a combination of stronger appetite for risk, unprecedentedly weak economic data and Brexit concerns weighed on the British currency. The pound had a poor week, slipping back after it had risen 3.9 percent against the dollar in 10 consecutive days of gains. It recovered against the dollar on Friday, touching \$1.2653 in earlier trade, before falling 0.6 percent on the day to \$1.2528 at 1504 GMT. Against the euro, the pound flattened at 89.69 pence. Analysts suggested sterling was behaving like a risk currency, strengthening when improving global market sentiment weakens demand for the safe-haven dollar.

Vasileios Gkionakis, head of FX strategy at Lombard Odier, said the pound’s losses this week made



LONDON: The pound recovered against the dollar on Friday, touching \$1.2653 in earlier trade, before falling 0.6 percent on the day to \$1.2528

British economy takes 25% hit from COVID

LONDON: Britain’s economy shrank by a quarter over March and April as entire sectors were shuttered by the coronavirus lockdown in what looks likely to be the bottom of a “catastrophic” crash before a long and slow recovery.

Dwarfing previous downturns, the economy contracted by 20.4 percent in April from March, when it shrank by nearly 6 percent. It was 24.5 percent smaller than in April 2019. Both of April’s readings represented bigger falls than the dire forecasts in a Reuters poll of economists.

The Office for National Statistics said the economy had shrunk back to its size in 2002.

“This is catastrophic, literally on a scale never seen before in history,” Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies think tank, said. “The real issue is what happens next.” Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the figures were no surprise as Britain’s huge services sector was being hit particularly hard by social distancing measures, but he said a recovery would follow.

“Coronavirus is likely to hit a country like the UK economically very hard. We depend on services, on human contact,” he said. “But we’re also a very resilient and a dynamic economy and we will bounce back.” Much of Britain’s retail sector is due to open its doors next week and the government last month urged people who could not do their jobs at home to return to work.

“Take action”

Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey – who has warned of the deepest recession in three centuries – said there had been signs of recovery since April’s “dramatic” fall but the big question was how much long-term economic damage would be done. “We hope that will be as small as possible but we have to be ready and ready to take action, not just the Bank of England but more broadly, on what we can do to offset those longer term damaging effects,” he said.

The BoE is expected to announce a fresh increase of at least 100 billion pounds (\$126 billion) in its bond-buying firepower next week. Finance minister Rishi Sunak is considering what further stimulus measures he needs to provide.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development said this week that Britain could suffer the worst downturn among the countries it covers, with an 11.5 percent slump this year. IFS director Johnson told Sky News the hit might be short, if the roughly one third of private sector employees who are temporarily laid off can return to work, consumers go out and spend again and Britain avoids a second COVID-19 wave. But he said it was more likely that unemployment would jump when the government’s wage subsidy scheme ended in October, and that Britain would limp into 2021 with the risk of a Brexit shock also on the horizon.

Britain left the European Union at the end of January and began a no-change transition period which lasts for the rest of 2020. Talks on a broad new deal have made little progress. The ONS said output in the dominant services sector fell by 19 percent in April from March while manufacturing was down more than 24 percent and construction crashed by 40 percent.

In the three months to April, the overall economy contracted by 10.4 percent from the previous three-month period. —Reuters

As Colombia eyes pensions, market shudders

BOGOTA: Colombia’s financial market cringed last week when it learned the government was planning to order pension funds to transfer some \$7.34 billion worth of contributions to the public retirement fund. The measure would have allowed 350,000 people with fewer than 10 years before retirement to move funds to the public pension fund, Colpensiones. It immediately sparked speculation the money would be used for some of the \$11.7 billion in pension costs the government faces this year, allowing it to redirect other funds toward coronavirus needs.

Although the measure was later ruled out by the government, a proposed law working its way through congress has kept market worries high. The law would also allow those with private pensions to voluntarily move to the public fund. The provision is meant to correct legal complaints that savers were not given sufficient advice when they joined private funds two decades ago.

A significant movement out of private pensions would have ripple effects in public bonds, as pension funds are major buyers, and in the stock market, where funds invest a large part of the \$71.6 billion they control.

“We ended up in the same place by a different route,” said Munir Jalil, BTG Pactual’s chief economist for the Andean region. “What it shows is the level of cash flow need... for the national government, which makes them consider these ways of getting funds.”

The country’s economy, usually one of the region’s heartiest, looks set to contract 5.5% this year because of months-long coronavirus quarantine and lower oil prices. “These proposals don’t help at all because we’d have to calculate how much money would leave private funds,” said Daniel Velandia, Credicorp Capital’s chief Colombian economist. “They would have to sell their positions or transfer debt titles to the government; it isn’t at all a positive impact.”

The policy has echoes of Argentina in 2008, analysts said, when private pensions were nationalized to make \$24 billion available to the government. Bogota’s “fortunate reversal” kept Colombia off Argentina’s “disastrous path,” former Finance Minister Juan Camilo Restrepo said on Twitter.

The government was considering allowing partial withdrawals from pension funds, Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla said on Wednesday. A day later, President Ivan Duque rejected the idea.

“This shows the deficiencies of the system and makes the need for a structural pension reform even more urgent,” said Mauricio Olivera, director at the Econometria consultancy. “If everyone moves to Colpensiones, it could create a pension time bomb because the subsidies are really high.” — Reuters



Developing nations, not including China and India, poured an unprecedented \$59.5 billion into clean energy.

Renewables not enough to meet climate goals

PARIS: The world added 12 percent more clean power capacity in 2019 than the year before, but new renewable energy planned over the next decade falls far short of what is needed to forestall dangerous global warming, the UN warned.

An additional 184 gigawatts (GW) of renewable power—mostly solar and wind—came on line last year, according to the Annual Global Trends in Renewable Energy Investment report, jointly issued by the UN Environment Programme and Bloomberg New Energy Finance (BNEF).

One gigawatt is similar to the capacity of a nuclear reactor. Total investment in renewables in 2019 was \$282.2 billion, led by China (\$83.4 billion), the United States (\$55.5 bn), Europe (\$54.6 billion), Japan (\$16.5 billion) and India \$9.3 billion), with a record 21 countries each spending at least \$2 billion. Developing nations—not including China and India—poured an unprecedented \$59.5 billion into clean energy. The rapidly falling cost of solar and wind power—less expensive in most electricity markets than coal—means more bang for the buck, the report showed.

Investment in 2019 was the same as the year before, but yielded an additional 20 GW of installed capacity. But measured against the Paris climate treaty target of capping global warming at “well below” two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, the transition to clean energy is not happening nearly fast enough, the report said. The 826 GW of new renewables planned by 2030 — at a cost of about \$1 trillion—is only a quarter of the

roughly 3,000 GW required to keep us on track for a 2C world, it concluded. Investment is lagging as well—more than \$2.7 trillion were committed to renewables during the last decade.

“Clean energy finds itself at a crossroads in 2020,” said BNEF chief executive Jon Moore, one of the report’s authors. “The last decade produced huge progress, but official targets for 2030 are far short of what is required to address climate change.”

When the current health crisis eases, he added, governments must not only boost renewable power, but the decarbonisation of transport, buildings and industry.

The huge amounts of cash mobilized to jump-start economies stalled by COVID-19 lockdowns is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to close this “renewables gap” in investment, the authors argue. “If governments take advantage of the ever-falling price tag of renewables to put clean energy at the heart of COVID-19 economic recovery, they can take a big step towards a healthy natural world,” said UNEP executive director Inger Andersen.

“This is the best insurance policy against global pandemics.” But the transition from a brown global economy to a green one is strewn with obstacles.

Investment in renewables last year, for example, was barely half the amount governments spent to subsidize fossil fuels, according to a report last week from the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Combined subsidies for both consumption and production last year totalled \$478 billion in 77 economies, the two intergovernmental agencies found. That’s an 18 percent drop compared to 2018, but the decrease was due mainly to lower oil and gas prices.

Indeed, subsidies for fossil fuel production in 44 countries increased 38 percent last year, OECD figures showed. “I am saddened to see some backsliding on efforts to phase out fossil fuel support,” OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría said in a statement. —AFP

Ukraine scientists see signs of hope after huge Chernobyl fires

CHERNOBYL EXCLUSION ZONE, Ukraine: Ukrainian scientist Oleksandr Borsuk looks bitterly at the charred trunks of old pine trees as the acrid smell of burnt wood hangs in the air. The scene he is taking in would not be out of place on the set of a sci-fi post-apocalyptic movie.

In the spring a huge fire battered the Chernobyl exclusion zone, devastating the lush forests at the scene of the world's worst nuclear accident and dealing a major blow to its ecosystem. "This pine forest will never be reborn," Borsuk, the 32-year-old head of the flora and fauna lab at the Chernobyl reserve, told AFP, adding a new ecosystem will form in its place.

The fire, which broke out in April and was only put out in mid-May, reached to within just 1.5 kilometers of the protective dome over a ruined reactor, according to Greenpeace. The blaze—the largest since the 1986 catastrophe—spanned 66,000 hectares (14.8 acres), including 42,000 hectares of forests. The fire also tore through 10 abandoned villages and an old cemetery near the village of Rozsokha, leaving behind burnt iron crosses and charred nameplates. Several pine trees fell across the tombs. Authorities said that no increase in radiation levels had been detected and there were no human casualties.

Local wildlife has not been spared, however.

While birds and large animals such as wolves, elk and lynxes managed to escape, some small mammals like hares as well as snakes and other reptiles perished. Speaking on a tour of the devastated areas, Borsuk said it was still too early to assess the full damage but noted that the conifer forests were hit hardest. "It takes a long time for conifers to regenerate," he said. "The trees will be dying for the next two to three years." Most of the forests will survive, however, he added.



An employee walks through coalfield trees in a burnt forest near the village of Ilovnytsya in the Chernobyl thirty-kilometer zone on Friday.—AFP

'Animals are returning'

Denys Vyshnevsky, head of science at the Chernobyl reserve, said a lot of plants had died but the worst had been avoided. "We are constantly monitoring and we are seeing positive trends," he said. "The animals are returning. The birds are already returning," he added. Even areas completely devastated by the fire will regenerate in a few years, Vyshnevsky said. Experts say the fire, which came from outside the exclusion zone, was caused

by an unusually dry winter and spring, which allowed the blaze to spread very quickly.

Vyshnevsky warned that such large-scale fires can happen again, as climate change takes hold. He said the country needed to prepare and learn from the United States and southern Europe where major fires are common. "We have to overhaul the entire system of surveillance, prevention and emergency response," he said. More than a thousand firefighters and aircraft were involved in battling

the blaze and at one point, thick smog reached the capital Kiev. Rain eventually came to the rescue.

Chernobyl polluted a large swathe of Europe when its fourth reactor exploded in April, 1986. People are not allowed to live within 30 kilometers (18 miles) of the power station. After the explosion, the three other reactors at Chernobyl continued to generate electricity until the power station finally closed in 2000. A giant protective dome was put in place over the fourth reactor in 2016. —AFP

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Lifestyle | Features



Picture taken in Zagreb, Croatia, shows a mini train deposit at the Mini Train museum.—AFP photos



Picture shows model trains layout, as part of the collections at the Backo Mini Train museum in Zagreb.



Visitors look at a model trains layout, as part of the collections at the Backo Mini Train museum in Zagreb.



Picture shows Antun Urbic, known as Backo, as he poses on his mini train museum in Zagreb.

Little engines that can: Zagreb's model train museum

Soaring over mountain gorges, past snowy ski slopes and into bustling stations, the trains in Antun Urbic's minuscule landscape enthral visitors to his model rail museum in Zagreb. The Backo Mini Express Museum, the largest of its kind in southeastern Europe, boasts more than a kilometre (half a mile) of tiny tracks traversing picturesque rural villages and city squares wrought in extraordinary detail. More than 2,500 figurines including mountaineers, wedding guests, police, construction workers and commuters populate the scenes. Urbic, who opened the museum in 2015, fell in love with trains 60 years ago when his father gave him a model set. "It was the only toy that moved by itself," said the 66-year-old who goes by the nickname Backo.

He started building sets in the attic of his Zagreb home before moving to a bigger space where he invited friends over to

model with him. "It began as a hobby," he told AFP. After spending four years piecing together a large-scale model, he opened the museum to the public.

Since then, the site has attracted 25,000 people a year, including model train enthusiasts from the United States, Australia and India. The museum reopened in May after closing for nearly three months under Croatia's coronavirus lockdown. "We could hardly wait to come here again," said Davorin Bozic, a regular accompanied by his three enthusiastic children. Eight-year-old Jan Zelic's favourite detail is in a cemetery where a hand sticks out from a grave. "It's really fun," he said.

His father Sasa, a 38-year-old economist, praised the "precise mechanics and imagination needed to construct all this. I was particularly impressed with the ski slope." The scene features miniature skiers

zig-zagging down a slalom run inspired by the one on nearby Medvednica, which hosts the men's and women's World Cup. It is the only model museum in Europe with skiers actually descending a mountainside instead of being glued to the slopes, according to Urbic. Among them are two figurines of Croatian skiing stars—siblings Ivica and Janica Kostelic—now retired.

The latter is depicted skiing with only one pole as she famously did after dropping the other during a 2006 World Cup race when she won bronze. "Everyone perceives this as a children's game but it is far from that," said Urbic's associate Zvonko Cebalo. "There is a concentration of knowledge—electronic, electric, IT, robotic."—AFP



Picture shows model trains layout, as part of the collections at the Backo Mini Train museum.



Picture shows model trains layout, as part of the collections at the Backo Mini Train museum.



Picture shows model trains layout, as part of the collections at the Backo Mini Train museum.

Truncated will: India landowner bequeaths land to elephants

An Indian landowner has willed most of his land to two elephants he said saved his life from gun-toting criminals, a decision that has upset his wife and children. Akhtar Imam, from a village in the eastern state of Bihar, said he changed his will to bequeath 2.5 hectares (6.2 acres) to gentle giants Moti (pearl) and Rani (queen). "I simply don't want hardship for my Moti and Rani, who are no less



This picture shows Indian landowner Akhtar Imam with one of his elephants at Murgia Chai village, in Janipur near Patna.—AFP

my family," Imam, 50, told AFP as his bathed the pachyderms on a sweltering hot day. "I don't want my elephants to face the fate of orphaned or abandoned captive elephants who die on the streets or in deserted fields due to lack of proper care." Imam, who runs a wildlife trust,

raised Moti, aged 20, and Rani, aged 15, from when they were born to another domesticated jumbo that has since died. Each elephant has two staff looking after them day and night, and roam his property freely.

He said his love for the pair grew even more when they saved him from "gun-carrying criminals" who he said tried to kill him last year while he slept. "When I opened my door to see why the elephants were trumpeting, I saw they were chasing criminals nearby," he said. "I am alive due to my elephants who had worked like bodyguards to me." Imam said he would also bequeath a smaller amount of land and his house to his wife and children, but they weren't entirely happy. "They don't understand that the elephants are not a showpiece for me... My relationship with elephants is life-long. We love each other."

He added: "Human greed is endless, even if you give them the whole world it's not enough." His wife and children declined to speak to AFP. Imam's gesture came as controversy raged in India over the recent death of a pregnant elephant after eating fruit laced with explosives in the southern state of Kerala. Asian elephants—*Elephas maximus*—used to roam across most of Asia, but are today restricted to 15 percent of their original range. The species is listed as endangered on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Red List. Of the 45,000 remaining, about a third live in captivity. Some Asian elephants live well into their 70s.—AFP

Doge's Palace reopens as tourists flock back to Venice

After three months of empty squares and alleys and gondoliers stranded on dry land, Venice sprang back to life on Saturday as tourists flocked back to the city for the reopening of the Doge's Palace. Hundreds of Italians and foreigners lined up for more than 300 metres (yards) in Saint Mark's Square, in front of the Ducal Palace. A local news agency said a thousand internet bookings had been recorded for the reopening day. "There were people queuing at 8:00 am this morning and, to be honest, it's just what we were hoping for," Maria Cristina Griabaudi, president of the Venice Civic Museums Foundation, told AFP. "It's a very strong emotion, like the first day of school," she explained.

Inside the palace, masks are compulsory, numerous signs encourage people to "keep their distance" and all the rooms are controlled to avoid overcrowding. After months without tourists Saturday marked a clear change, with Venice bustling much as it would do on any ordinary spring weekend. Souvenir shops have reappeared in Saint Mark's Square and almost all of the shops and restaurants—including the historic Cafe Florian—have reopened. Around the Rialto Canal, visitors pushed their way through the tight alleys, and the famous gondolas and vaporetti, the city's water buses, were again loaded with passengers and going about their business on the canals. "If the most spoken language is Italian, there are many Germans and, surprisingly, French," Ansa reported. "We hope to have slow tourism in the future," said Gabriella Belli, director of the Foundation for the civic museums of Venice. "This does not mean less tourism, it means better organised tourism."

The COVID-19 epidemic has killed more than 34,000 in Italy but as the number of new cases steadily falls so the country continues the process of deconfinement which began last month. The country's many monuments, famous buildings, museums and emblematic places have almost all reopened, including St Peter's Basilica in Rome, the site of Pompeii, the leaning Tower of Pisa, and the cathedrals of Florence and Milan. In a bid to retrieve the summer tourist season, Italy reopened its borders on June 3.—AFP

'Baby dragons' go on display in Slovenia

Slithering through their subterranean aquarium, three "baby dragons" have gone on display in a Slovenian cave, where they hatched in 2016 in a rare successful breeding, officials said Thursday. Only 30 visitors per day will be allowed to visit the so-called baby dragons—ancient underwater predators that can live up to 100 years and only breed once in a decade. "We are proud to present three out of the 21 baby olms, the world-famous 'dragon's offspring', which we have kept a close eye on since 2016," the Postojna cave said in a statement.

The three are among 21 offspring that hatched in 2016 when one of the olms at the cave lay around 60 eggs in one of the observation tanks. To ensure their survival and gather more information about the creatures, cave authorities kept them far from visitors in a cave laboratory as their "best kept and most carefully guarded secret"—until now. Reaching a maximum length of 35 cen-

timetres (13.5 inches), the blind animal with its four tiny limbs is a far cry from the scary monsters conjured up in national folklore. Sometimes also referred to as "human fish", the slim vertebrate sports three feathery gills on each side of its elongated snout. The body's sheer pink skin makes it easy to spot the internal organs.

The protected eel-like species can go without food for up to a decade. Found primarily in Balkan cave rivers, the olms have been living in the world-famous Postojna cave, 50 kilometres (30 miles) southwest of the capital Ljubljana, for what researchers say is millions of years. The baby dragons' presentation comes only days after the cave—one of Europe's largest that usually draws 700,000 visitors a year—reopened its doors following three months of closure due to the coronavirus epidemic.—AFP



This photo in Postojna Cave shows an olm, an ancient underwater predator, which can live up to 100 years and only breed once in a decade.—AFP



A woman looks at a mural showing the face of George Floyd, an unarmed black man who died after a white policeman knelt on his neck during an arrest in the US, painted on a section of Israel's controversial separation barrier in the city of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank on June 10, 2020, with text reading "I can't breathe, I want justice not O2".—AFP

Oscars to draw up diversity rules for nominees

Hollywood's motion picture academy will introduce new eligibility rules to boost diversity among Oscars nominees under a raft of new measures announced Friday. The move comes after years of criticism over a lack of diversity among the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' members, and among the Oscar nominees and winners they select. "To ensure more diverse representation," a new task force will be set up "to develop and implement new representation and inclusion standards for Oscars eligibility," the organization said in a statement. The measures will not affect films in contention this year. The Academy did not give any details about the new rules, but said the changes are intended to "encourage equitable hiring practices and representation on and off screen."

It will also host a series of panel discussions on diversity, including a talk hosted by Academy governor Whoopi Goldberg on "the lasting impact of racist tropes and harmful stereotypes in Hollywood films."

The changes were announced following mass anti-racism protests that have swept the country since the killing of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25. Since 2015 and the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, the Academy has made concerted efforts to broaden its membership.



In this file photo an Oscars statue is displayed on the red carpet area on the eve of the 92nd Oscars ceremony at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California.—AFP

The annual intake of new members reached 50 percent female for the first time in 2019, while non-white membership has doubled in five years. But less than one-third admitted were people of color. "To truly meet this moment, we must recognize how much more needs to be done, and we must listen, learn, embrace the challenge, and hold ourselves and our community accountable," said Academy President David Rubin.—AFP

Fight the Power: The soundtrack of US anti-racism protests

Anti-racism protesters have rolled out a creative batch of chants to soundtrack the ongoing US demonstrations, but both fresh music and timeless classics are also front and center. Rapper YG's recently released "FTP"—F*** The Police—has become a de-facto anthem for the thousands of people pouring into the streets, whose demands include sweeping reforms of law enforcement after the latest death in custody of an unarmed black man, George Floyd. Spotify's "Black Lives Matter" playlist—a 66-track song list that includes justice-minded hits from James Brown, Killer Mike, Nina Simone, N.W.A., Childish Gambino, Beyonce and Kendrick Lamar—has won over nearly one million subscribers.

And the streaming platform's daily "Viral 50" list has seen classics like Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"—a spoken-word song from 1970 whose title came from a slogan used by US Black Power movements—break into the top 10. Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" has also seen a resurgence. The Prince estate meanwhile released a new video centered on police brutality for the late artist's song "Baltimore," which he originally wrote and released in 2015 following the death in police custody of Freddie Gray, who was black. Singer Trey Songz released the gospel-tinged song "2020 Riots: How Many Times," in response to the recent wave of protests, while folk and soul singer Leon Bridges released "Sweetener," a meditation on racism.

"The death of George Floyd was the straw that broke the camel's back for me," Bridges, who was born in Texas, posted. "I have been numb for too long, caloused when it came to the issues of police brutality," he said. "It was the first time I wept for a man I never met. I am George Floyd, my brothers are George Floyd, and my sisters are George Floyd. I cannot and will not be silent any longer."

For Fredara Hadley, an ethnomusicology professor at the Juilliard School, the black experience has long been the primary driver behind protest music in the US, from abolitionists latching on to spirituals to the 1960s Civil Rights movement powered by jazz, rock, soul and R&B. "Black music and black ambitions were allowed to occupy spaces that... the general black population could not," she said. "It served as an ambassador and avatar of blackness in complicated kinds of ways." "You had those musicians writing music that directly responded to and was engaged with whatever was happening in the movement."—AFP



A World Redrawn: Novelist says Syrians will remain unheard

The novel coronavirus pandemic briefly gave Syrians a sense of belonging to the rest of the world after years of isolating war, Syrian author Khaled Khalifa said. But the international community is too busy to look their way and the planet will continue to be as barbaric as ever, with no lessons on the value of nature learnt, said the award-winning writer of the novel "No Knives in the Kitchens of this City". Khalifa spoke to AFP in his home in the Syrian capital Damascus, where the government has announced 144 cases of the COVID-19 disease and six deaths in areas it controls.

What has the virus meant for Syrians?

"For years during the war, Syrians were preoccupied with their limited world, a world of daily death. But today their tragedy has become part of humankind's as a whole. They shared in the meaning of fear and death with the rest of the world. Today their fear has become communal, shared with others. It's probably the first time that they feel they are part of humankind. But despite this, we have remained on the margins and our problems interest no one. The world is too busy with the coronavirus to hear Syrians. Tomorrow, there will be other reasons for it to be busy and unable to hear us. Nothing will change and the war will continue."

What is a virus in war?

"Syrians are those to least fear the coronavirus because they have been, and continue to be, bogged down in death, but... the virus has compounded the difficulties of their daily lives. All burning issues in Syria have remained (burning issues) during the pandemic and will afterwards. We live in a tunnel of perpetual waiting. One cannot compare the coronavirus to war, as it belittles (the suffering of) millions of human beings. We are speaking of a huge human tragedy, 10 years of hardship for a huge group of human beings. What has happened in Syria remains unique in its production of collective suffering."

What will the world look like afterwards?

"The world will remain just as barbaric as before the battle against COVID-19 and become even more brutal. It will not change or learn from this lesson that came as final warning that we cannot defy nature. In the battle against coronavirus, nature is not an enemy but the one attacked. All that it does is try to defend itself. The attacker are the large companies abandoning all principles in the quest of profit. The third party afflicted along with nature are people who would like life to be more humane."

Who will win this battle?

"Some people say the conflict will intensify in the markets with even greater abandon of values and even more encroachment on nature. In realistic stories, the good never prevails, it's always evil that wins in the end. But this time we can't let it, because it's clear this will be a last stand. For 30 years, we have not heard a politician in the world say: 'These are our principles.' They all say: 'These are our interests.' We need to produce new values to preserve humaneness, adapted to all humanity."



Writer Khaled Khalifa speaks during an interview with AFP at his home in the Syrian capital Damascus.—AFP

How has the pandemic affected you?

"The coronavirus allowed me to give wider rein to my imagination. Years ago when I wanted to write something very imaginative, I was scared no one would believe it. But now everything will be easy to believe because what has happened was once unimaginable. I think hundreds of screenwriters are thinking of making films about the coronavirus. But the virus in Syria is different to the virus in America. Even if it's the same illness, its social consequences are totally different. The coronavirus forced me to think more and ask myself questions we still have not answered. How did these humans become so selfish? Why is there all this production and waste of resources today? Why is there no justice? Why are murderers living on, protected by bank owners and large companies? Are we able to build a more humane, less criminal future?"—AFP



Tour guide Mike Anderson takes visitors on a 'plague walk', taking them around sites in Stockholm's old town related to pandemics of the plague in the 14th and 18th century, and an outbreak of cholera that hit the city in the mid-19th century.—AFP photos

Stockholm guide offers COVID-weary Swedes a tour of pandemics past

With tourists confined at home and Stockholmers avoiding crowds, a guide is trying to boost business with tours of the city's previous pandemics, from the black death to cholera outbreaks. On a sunny Saturday, Mike Anderson led a group of history buffs on a 'Plague Walk' through Stockholm's Old Town, pausing by churches and in the shadows of narrow orange and yellow houses that line the streets to point out how the city was marked by pandemics past. "I think it's quite interesting when you take things that happen today and connect it to history and see people have been through this before," said Anderson, 46.

Dressed in a long, rough cotton shirt over his clothes—along with a long, beaked mask, his costume for the tour—Anderson led the group through the cobbled streets. Four friends had dressed in black for the occasion, one of whom had fashioned a repli-

ca of a mask worn by plague doctors in the Middle Ages from a paper bag, featuring a long beak and narrow eye holes. They listened as Anderson took them back to the outbreak of bubonic plague that wracked the country in the 1350s, killing up to one third of its population.

Further on, they stopped in shaded churchyards to hear stories about a plague that swept through Sweden and the Baltic region in the 1710s and an outbreak of cholera in the mid-19th century. One visitor was unsure what parallels to draw with today's coronavirus, but glad of the afternoon out. "I had studied a bit before, but there was a lot of new things" in the tour, 27-year-old Stockholm resident Vera said. "It was exciting," she added, holding the makeshift plague mask she had brought along.

The group listened to Anderson as he used a series of props to illustrate his tales, occasionally run-

ning ahead and leaping out to surprise the group, as the streets of the normally bustling Old Town were almost empty. Anderson's business dropped off as concerns over the novel coronavirus mounted and governments imposed measures to prevent the virus's spread from February onwards. Sweden avoided a full lockdown but gatherings of more than 50 people were banned as the virus spread. Sweden has reported nearly 5,000 deaths from the virus.

As the number of bookings for his Old Town 'ghost walks' dropped, Andersson came up with the new idea as "kind of a survival instinct". He now plans to offer the tour more regularly and hopes it might help Swedes face the current pandemic without panicking, as well as some relief. "Most of all, I want them to have entertainment for one hour," he said.—AFP

Fresh Lebanon protests as economic crisis spirals



TRIPOLI: Lebanese anti-government protesters clash with soldiers in this northern port city late Saturday amid fresh protests over a spiralling economic crisis. — AFP

BEIRUT: Hundreds of demonstrators angered by a deepening economic crisis rallied Saturday across Lebanon for a third consecutive day, after violent overnight riots sparked condemnation from the political elite. Protesting against the surging cost of living and the government's apparent impotence in the face of Lebanon's worst economic turmoil since the 1975-1990 civil war, protesters in central Beirut brandished flags and chanted anti-government slogans.

"We are here to demand the formation of a new transitional government" and early parliamentary elections, Nehmat Badreddine, an activist and demonstrator told AFP near the Grand Serail seat of government. In the northern city of Tripoli, young men scuffled with security forces, who fired rubber bullets to disperse crowds. The clashes there left more than 120 people injured, according to figures released by the Red Cross and local medical services.

The stand-off began after young men blocked a highway to prevent a number of trucks carrying produce destined for Syria from passing through, according to the official National News Agency. The World Food Program issued a statement to say that it had sent a convoy of 39 truckloads of food aid to Syria.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab in a speech condemned Friday night's violence and what he termed efforts to mount a "coup" against the government and "manipulate" the value of the Lebanese pound. "The state and the people are being subjected to blackmail," he said, vowing to defeat corruption in the country.

Lebanon is caught in a spiralling economic crisis, including a rapid devaluation of the Lebanese pound, which has triggered a fresh wave of demonstrations since Thursday. Local media said the exchange rate had tumbled to 6,000 Lebanese

pounds per dollar on the black market at one point Friday, compared to the official peg of 1,507 in place since 1997.

Symbolic funeral

In Martyrs' Square, the epicentre of protests in downtown Beirut, demonstrators dressed in black and with their faces whitened carried a coffin draped with the Lebanese flag in a symbolic funeral Saturday for their crisis-ridden country. President Michel Aoun has announced that the central bank will implement measures from today including "feeding dollars into the market", in a bid to support the Lebanese pound.

Despite the pledges, some 200 young men gathered on mopeds in central Beirut on Friday night, some of them defacing shop fronts and setting fire to stores. Security forces fired tear gas to disperse them and some of the young men threw stones and

fire crackers back. People also took to the streets in the cities of Saida and Kfar Remmane, in the south, to denounce the economic crisis.

Diab called on officials to assess damage in central Beirut. Former premier Saad Hariri toured the area, condemning vandalism and riots. Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi said security forces would find those responsible for damaging property in the capital. Lebanon — one of the most indebted countries in the world, with a sovereign debt of more than 170 percent of GDP — went into default in March.

It started talks with the International Monetary Fund last month in a bid to unlock billions of dollars in financial aid. Dialogue is ongoing. Unemployment has soared to 35 percent nationwide. The country enforced a lockdown in mid-March to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus, dealing a further blow to businesses. — AFP

Fears of second wave amid new...

Continued from Page 1

At least 429,000 people worldwide have died from the respiratory illness, nearly halfway through a year in which countless lives have been upended as the pandemic ravages the global economy. The total number of confirmed cases has doubled to 7.7 million in slightly over a month and the disease is now spreading most rapidly in Latin America, where it is threatening healthcare systems and sparking political turmoil.

Brazil has the second-highest number of virus deaths after the United States, surpassing Britain's toll, and the Chilean health minister resigned on Saturday amid a furore over the country's true number of fatalities. There is still no treatment for COVID-19, but pharmaceutical group AstraZeneca said it has agreed to supply an alliance of European countries with up to 400 million doses of a possible vaccine. German government sources told AFP a vaccine could be developed by the end of the year.

Many European nations are further lifting painful lockdowns that have saved lives and forced case-loads down, but have also withered economies and caused misery for millions. The EU has recommended that member states fully reopen their frontiers with each other on June 15, but the border reopenings have been far from harmoniously coordinated.

Some like Poland have done so already, with

people from other European Union countries allowed to visit, and Germany said it would end land border checks today. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis travelled to picturesque Santorini island on Saturday to open his country's tourism season. "Greece is ready to welcome tourists this summer by putting safety and health as our number one priority," he said in English in front of a spectacular sunset. France has said it will gradually reopen to countries outside the borderless Schengen zone from July.

In another joyful return to semi-normality, football superstar Lionel Messi took to the pitch again in Spain as Barcelona resumed their La Liga title challenge and thumped Real Mallorca 4-0 in an empty stadium. Live sport also returned on Saturday to New Zealand, which has gone 22 days without new coronavirus cases, as 20,000 rugby fans watched the Otago Highlanders edge the Waikato Chiefs. But even in the much-awaited global sporting revival, there are wobbles — Australian rugby league officials postponed a top-level game yesterday hours before kick-off due to a coronavirus scare.

The World Health Organization said this week the pandemic is accelerating in Africa, and Botswana's capital Gaborone was locked down Saturday after new cases were detected. And in the US, which has seen the most COVID-19 deaths with over 115,000, more than a dozen states — including populous Texas and Florida — reported their highest-ever daily case totals in recent days. The rise comes as huge anti-racism protests rage across America and the world, with many demonstrators wearing masks to protect against the spread of the virus. — AFP

\$40 to \$55 a day, transporting tourists to and from the site on the back of his donkey. "We'll be in a real pickle" if the tourist industry doesn't pick up, he said, adding that since mid-March he has been working for a livestock seller.

Farajat said he hoped visitors would return quickly to "countries less affected by the pandemic" like the kingdom. But tour guide Nawafleh was worried some tourists, particularly the elderly and pensioners, may be reluctant to return. With a population of around 10 million, Jordan has officially recorded just over 800 cases of COVID-19 cases and nine deaths.

Tourism earned Jordan \$5.3 billion last year, according to Abed al-Razzaq Arabiyat, head of the Jordan Tourism Board. But revenues have almost completely dried up, he said, promising measures to help salvage the season, including a focus on domestic tourism.

Meanwhile, for Petra's 45 hotels, the situation is grim. At the three-star La Maison, a lonely receptionist eyed the entrance, with no guests in sight. "The pandemic came at the peak of our tourist season," said owner Tarek Twissi, who is also the head of the Petra hotels association. "Reservations were at over 90 percent and in less than a week they were all cancelled", he said. "The occupancy rate at my hotel is now at zero." — AFP

Officials linked to Bangladesh...

Continued from Page 1

9 pm instead of 6 pm to 6 am and the lockdown on some areas, mainly Hawally, is expected to be eased.

The Cabinet will also review two grillings against the ministers of education and finance, expected to be debated on June 16 or 17. The Assembly is

Delhi virus fears rise as...

Continued from Page 1

Some local Delhi councils say the real death toll is twice the number given by the regional government. Indian media has been full of tragic stories of people dying after being turned away by hospitals. One pregnant woman died as she was being shuttled between hospitals. A 78-year-old man petitioned the Delhi High Court for a ventilator bed but died before the matter could be taken up. India has now recorded more than 300,000 coronavirus cases with nearly 9,000 fatalities.

Several families have used social media to recount their harrowing experiences after being refused hospital beds. Jain's family had joined a noisy, nationwide tribute to health workers, banging pots and pans from rooftops and balconies after a nationwide lockdown started in March. Now they feel abandoned. "The government is doing nothing. They are just playing with our feelings," Kashish said.

Militarization of cops stoked...

Continued from Page 1

nestled near the scenic Glacier National Park, received a landmine-resistant armored vehicle, one year after taking delivery of a military transport. The 10-person (two only part-time) police department in Ada, Oklahoma, population 16,000, got their mine-resistant armored car in July 2019, after stockpiling 34 M-16 assault rifles over the years.

In a country where many people have their own guns and where schools have suffered mass shootings, even local education districts are taking advantage of the Pentagon's handouts. The 47 primary and secondary schools of the Bay District in Panama City, Florida acquired no less than 27 assault rifles and two mine-resistant armored vehicles in 2012 and 2013.

The "1033" Pentagon surplus program has existed for years. Since 1997, the US military has distributed used and new equipment ranging from handguns to

expected to resume its regular sessions on Tuesday following several weeks of suspension due to the coronavirus, and is scheduled to debate a large number of issues.

MPs have sent a letter demanding that all issues related to expats and the population structure should be sent to the Assembly's human resources committee, whose main function is to find jobs for Kuwaitis. MPs have demanded that drastic measures are taken to reduce the number of expats in the country and have submitted draft laws to achieve this target. But such issues require a long time to carry out.

Jain's devastated relatives are now waiting to get tested themselves but the Delhi government allows that for only high-risk and symptomatic family members. The city government has estimated that it could need 80,000 beds by the end of July, and warned hotels and wedding venues that they are likely to be turned into hospitals.

Currently government hospitals have 8,505 designated pandemic beds while private hospitals have 1,441. But families say they are being forced to spend a small fortune for the few beds that are available. Suman Gulati, whose father is a coronavirus patient, said she was asked for one million rupees (\$13,200) by a private hospital for a bed. "Once I paid the money getting a bed was not a problem. But arranging such a huge amount of money at such a critical time was," she told AFP. "What if I fall sick next, what will I do? Should I sell my property, my jewellery?"

A sting operation by the Mirror Now TV channel showed five Delhi hospitals asking coronavirus patients to pay up to \$5,250 in order to be admitted. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has accused private hospitals of lying about available beds and promised tough action if they were found extorting money. — AFP

helicopters to armored vehicles, worth around \$8.6 billion, to more than 8,000 federal, tribal and local police forces, according to the US Congress. In 2015 President Barack Obama severely limited the program, but his successor Donald Trump restored it in 2017.

That year alone, some 500 million pieces of military equipment were transferred to the country's police services under the 1033 program. But the recent anti-police protests have recharged efforts to stop it. Last week around 200 lawmakers in Congress, mostly Democrats, sponsored a bill, the "Stop Militarizing Law Enforcement Act", to again reel in the program.

The bill, in the House of Representatives, would strictly limit the transfer of guns, ammunition, grenades, explosives, certain kinds of vehicles, and drones and other aircraft designed for the battlefield. A parallel bill is being prepared in the Senate, pushed by Democrat Brian Schatz, who has fought against over-arming the police for years.

"It is clear that many police departments are being outfitted as if they are going to war, and it is not working in terms of maintaining the peace," Schatz told The New York Times. "Just because the Department of Defense has excess weaponry doesn't mean it will be put to good use." — AFP

Petra a ghost town as virus...

Continued from Page 1

country's GDP, employing about 100,000 people. A father of six, Nawafleh used to earn some \$70 a day. "In the past, the number of visitors varied according to the upheavals in the region. But today, there are no tourists at all. It's never happened before," he said. Jordan was already in a precarious situation before the pandemic, with unemployment at 19.3 percent in the first quarter of 2020.

Bordering conflict-torn Syria and Iraq, and lacking the oil wealth of some of its neighbors, the kingdom has worked to revive its tourism industry. Petra, an immense 264,000-sq-m site south of Amman, saw a record "1.13 million visitors last year, including a million from abroad", said Suleiman Al-Farajat, responsible for tourism and development in Petra.

About 80 percent of the region's roughly 38,000 people who are mainly nomadic Bedouins, depend on tourism directly or indirectly, he said. Like Nael Nawas, 41, a father of eight, who earned between

Stars

Daily SuDoku								
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hard

Yesterday's Solution								
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7	2	1	8	4	5	3	6	9
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3	1	4	6	8	2	9	7	5
2	7	9	5	1	3	6	4	8
8	6	5	9	7	4	1	3	2

medium

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

A group you're affiliated with could meet or have a virtual/group chat today, Aries. You should focus more on listening to what they have to say than on actively participating in discussions. You'll want to absorb every idea that comes up and seriously mull it over before expressing yourself. When you communicate, you should do it freely and openly. Your mind is both intuitive and logical, so expect to learn a lot.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

Communicating with a current or potential romantic partner could involve a lot of subtlety, finding a way to enjoy each other's company while not divulging too much. You're likely to feel especially passionate today, Libra. Take care of your health and look your best. Your aesthetic sense is especially high right now. You could also give some thought to artistic projects. Inspiration could be all around you.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Your communications could bring up the subject of the world economy and what it's going to mean to individuals today. You could be contemplating and maybe even discussing your financial future. This is a good time to make such plans, Taurus, as your mind is logical and intuitive today. Write down any ideas or insights that come your way. You'll want to remember them later.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

An increased psychological awareness and heightened intuition could have you tuning in to the thoughts and feelings of family members before they even know what they want, Scorpio. You might be able to pick up the thoughts of strangers. This is the day to trust your inner voice, especially when it comes to making plans with others. While this atmosphere lasts, they might not be too communicative or inclined to say what they want.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Today you might receive a phone call from a friend you haven't seen for a while. An intense and emotional conversation could follow, Gemini. Stimulating news could have you preoccupied for a while. Spiritual activities could also take up much of your time. Listening to someone speak might cause you to feel more insightful than usual. This will enable you to apply good common sense to abstract concepts.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

The focus today is on families, with special emphasis on children. You might spend time telling stories today. Someone with whom you're in contact could be dealing with some powerful emotional issues and not want company. There isn't much you can do, Sagittarius. Let the person know you're there and then leave them alone. In the meantime, others are in a festive mood.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

You generally enjoy philosophy, metaphysics, and other forms of higher thought, Cancer, but today you could find yourself almost obsessive about them. You might decide to sequester yourself and concentrate on these concepts. This is a great day to do this because intellect combines with intuition to enable you to understand and make sense of abstract ideas. You can apply them to your everyday life. Go to it.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Others, particularly family members, might be rather quiet today. It could seem as if everyone is running around like crazy but not sharing what's on their minds. You'll have to trust your intuition when you need to know what they're up to, Capricorn. Writing could come from deep within, whether through letters, poetry, or novels, allowing you to express a facet you don't often see.



Leo (July 23-August 22)

Discussions involving a group you're affiliated with could lead to some deep subjects, such as philosophy, metaphysics, science - or all three. Your mind should be quick and sharp today, Leo, on both a logical and an intuitive level. You'll probably soak up just about everything you hear. You could give it a lot of thought, and yes, you should be able to make sense of it all.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

Communication, particularly with family members and romantic partners, could take place more subtly than verbally today. Nonetheless, Aquarius, you'll sense strong love and support from everyone. Romance, especially, should be intense and sensual, so this is a great day to schedule an evening alone with a lover if possible. Inspiration for creative projects, particularly in the home, could well up from deep inside. Don't suppress it - let it flow.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Today you might decide to do some repairs or decorating in your home. You'll have a lot of good ideas welling up from deep within you, Virgo, and be astute enough to put them to work in the real world. You might not feel much like talking, however. Therefore, don't be surprised if communication is more subtle than overt today.



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

Today you should be feeling especially intuitive, particularly where family members are concerned, Pisces. It certainly won't be easy for anyone to lie to you. You might also think about making some repairs to your home, which you may have been putting off. You might spend at least part of the day alone meditating or contemplating your future. Your mind is clear and active, so this is a good time to do it.

Join the dots



Word Scramble

Valentine's Day Word Scramble

DIRECTIONS: Unscramble the letters to form the names of 11 different Valentine's Day words. Then unscramble the shaded letters to answer the riddle.

- LIRANGD
- HAETR
- OLCHAOTEC
- DICPU
- MOEP
- LSWROFE
- BOLEDEV
- ANDCY
- ORSSE
- EOEVNPLE
- RRABYUFE

What did the boy bear say to the girl bear on Valentine's Day?



Sports

Photo of the Day



Aerobatic paragliding world record holder Horacio Llorens trains in El Hierro, Canary Islands on March 12, 2020. — Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

MLB players union rejects owners restart plan

NEW YORK: The Major League Baseball Players Association has rejected the latest plan from team owners to start a coronavirus-reduced 2020 season and asked for them to produce a schedule.

Tony Clark, the players' union executive director, said in a statement Saturday night that it was time to halt negotiations and set a start date for an MLB campaign played in empty stadiums.

"It unfortunately appears that further dialogue with the league would be futile," Clark said. "It's time to get back to work. Tell us when and where." The MLB season was to have started in late March but the league shut down games with two weeks remaining in the pre-season due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The last MLB proposal to the union called for 72 games with 70% of prorated salaries. A March 26 deal between MLB and the union allows the league to set a schedule. MLB has indicated it would impose a schedule of about 50 games and pay full prorated salaries to the players worth about \$1.25 billion.

Multiple reports said MLB games would be played in home stadiums without spectators.

Players have been steadfast in talks for a start plan that they be paid full prorated salaries while owners have sought to trim that percentage even as both sides sought to play a longer campaign.

"Our No. 1 focus is playing the fullest season possible, as soon as possible, as safely as possible," Clark said. "Players agreed to billions in monetary concessions as a means to that end."

"We made additional proposals to inject new revenues into the industry... it has now become apparent that these efforts have fallen upon deaf ears," ESPN reported the union sent a letter to the league demanding to be informed of MLB's plans no later than Monday. — AFP

Schauffele seizes one-shot lead in PGA Tour return at Colonial

World number one McIlroy shot 69 to join a pack on 200

WASHINGTON: Xander Schauffele closed with a birdie to fire a four-under par 66 and seize a one-stroke lead after Saturday's third round of the Charles Schwab Challenge, the first PGA Tour event since the coronavirus shutdown.

The 26-year-old American stood on 13-under par 197 after 54 holes at Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas, with five rivals deadlocked behind him on 198. South Africa's Branden Grace and Americans Gary Woodland, Justin Thomas, Collin Morikawa and Jordan Spieth were one adrift with Americans Daniel Berger and Harold Varner on 199.

"All of us, everyone, it's like six guys are tied for the lead," said world number 12 Schauffele, who is bidding for his fifth PGA Tour title but first since January 2019. "Birdies are important but bogeys are bad. It's really unique because everybody is so bunched."

World number one Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland shot 69 to join a pack on 200 that included England's Justin Rose, Mexico's Abraham Ancer, Canadian Corey Conners and Americans Patrick Reed and Bryson DeChambeau. The tournament marks the return of the US golf season after a 91-day layoff since early March due to the coronavirus pandemic and is being played without spectators.

"It really was quiet out here," said Schauffele. "I prefer fans." Schauffele has made 16 birdies and only

three bogeys through the first three rounds. "I was playing really well at home. I was making a ton of birdies," Schauffele said. "I don't see why it should change out here."

Schauffele, who shared second behind Tiger Woods at last year's Masters, credited his strong start from the long break to playing practice rounds with Charley Hoffman and Phil Mickelson during the layoff.

"It knocked off a lot of the rust that was there during quarantine," he said. "I have to attribute it to that." Schauffele opened with a tap-in birdie but missed the green and a six-foot putt to bogey the par-3 fourth. He answered with another birdie at the par-4 seventh and tap-in birdies at 10 and the par-5 11th.

A 17-foot birdie putt at the 15th was wasted when he missed the green at the par-3 16th and made bogey, but his closing birdie gave him a nose ahead of the pack entering the last round.

Birdies are important

'KIND OF A WEIRD DAY'

Thomas also fired a 66 despite struggling much of the day to find a rhythm. "It was kind of a weird day," he said. "I definitely didn't have my best stuff. Hit a lot of my best drives that bounced into the rough."

"I wasn't quite sharp enough to get everything going with my approaches and putts so I'm glad to get to four-under," Woodland and Grace also shot 66s with Morikawa firing a 67 and Spieth a 68.



FORT WORTH: Xander Schauffele of the United States plays a shot on the 17th hole during the third round of the Charles Schwab Challenge on June 13, 2020 at Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas. —AFP

"Happy with my game now and the way I played," Woodland said. "The key around here is put it in the fairway and keep moving forward." Varner, trying to become only the eighth African-American winner on the PGA Tour, led after 36 holes but fell two back with a third-round 70.

McIlroy, a top-five finisher in his past seven events worldwide, opened with a tap-in birdie but made bo-

geys at seven and eight. Birdies at the 11th and a 23-foot birdie putt at 14 only left him on 69 and three back.

Rose had six birdies but a double bogey at the par-4 fifth and bogeys at 16 and 18 also put him three shots off the pace. "It has been a mixed bag for me. It has been exciting," Rose said. "In with a chance tomorrow. Going to have to attack. It's a great leaderboard." — AFP

Djokovic's tennis capital shrugs off trouble on border

BELGRADE: Novak Djokovic's Balkans charity tennis tournament suffered an embarrassing setback on Saturday when the planned Montenegro leg of a four-nation tour was cancelled over coronavirus protocol rules.

However, that blow didn't deter fans from hailing the 33-year-old, 17-time Grand Slam title winner's brainchild as having made Belgrade into the temporary "capital" of world tennis.

The Adria Tour, which features world number one Djokovic, as well as third-ranked Dominic Thiem, number seven Alexander Zverev and Grigor Dimitrov, the world 19, got underway on Saturday.

The Montenegro leg was due to be the third stop on June 27 and 28 after Croatia and before the conclusion in Bosnia.

However, a spokesman for the organisers said the visit to neighbouring Montenegro was called off when it became apparent Serbia did not match strict health guidelines.

"The fact that citizens of Serbia are not on the list of the Montenegrin public health institute, and cannot travel to Montenegro, is an insurmountable obstacle," organisers said in a statement.

Podgorica reopened its borders on June 1 for countries with fewer than 25 people

infected with the coronavirus from 100,000 inhabitants.

The list of those countries is regularly updated. However, Serbia does not figure on it.

Asked to comment on social distancing measures during the Belgrade leg of the event, which has witnessed packed stands, Djokovic said that both Serbia and the region were relatively successful in containing the virus.

"Of course you can criticise, you can also say this is dangerous or not, but it's not up to me to make the calls what is health-wise right or wrong," he told reporters on Friday, stressing he was acting in line with recommendations of the Serbian government.

Balkan countries coped with the coronavirus pandemic with relative success. The region of some 22 million people registered about 24,000 infections and fewer than 800 deaths. The ATP and WTA Tours have been suspended since March due to the pandemic and will not resume at least until the end of July.

Initially, the organisers in Belgrade, respecting the rules in force after the relaxation of the lockdown in Serbia, put 1,000 tickets on sale. They sold out in just seven minutes. Since then, the authorities have further relaxed the lockdown and another 1,000 tickets were put on sale and they sold out almost as quickly.

According to the organisers, 2,000 additional tickets were distributed to various sponsors. "It's fantastic, we are the capital of the tennis world this weekend," said Dusan Bogicevic, 25, a law student

from Belgrade.

Fans watching the action at the Novak Tennis Centre on the banks of the Danube appeared to have little regard for health precautions recommended by the organisers. Each person was given a mask at the entrance to the stadium, but inside only a few wore them.

Amongst the players, Zverev of Germany was happy to be back playing. "To tell you the truth I didn't see that many people in one room in quite a while," Zverev told a press conference.

Since Friday, fans flocked to the centre, taking selfies with the players. Youngsters received tennis lessons. Former Serbian women's world number one Jelena Jankovic came out of retirement after more than two years to play mixed doubles with Djokovic.

The Belgrade action began in earnest on Saturday. Matches are on clay courts. The four headline stars were joined by Serbian ATP players — Viktor Troicki, Filip Krajinovic and Dusan Lajovic.

Two big surprises marked the first day — Djokovic lost to Krajinovic in three sets and Dimitrov went down in two against late call-up Nikola Milojevic. On June 20 and 21, the Adria Tour tournament will move to Zadar, on Croatia's Adriatic coast.

Djokovic will be joined there by Croatia's 2014 US Open winner Marin Cilic and Borna Coric. The final stop in Bosnia will be in the northwestern town of Banja Luka on July 3 and 4. The tournament will close on July 5 with an exhibition match in Sarajevo between Djokovic and Bosnia's Damir Dzumhur. The money raised will be donated to various regional charities. — AFP

US Open faces D-day amid player uncertainty

LOS ANGELES: The fate of the US Open is set to be revealed next week when officials decide whether or not the tournament can go ahead as planned amid mounting unease among top players.

The deadly COVID-19 pandemic, which has decimated the international tennis calendar, now has the Flushing Meadows fortnight in its crosshairs.

With New York the hardest-hit city by the US coronavirus crisis, the United States Tennis Association has been scrambling to come up with a plan that allows the tournament to be staged.

But with the French Open postponed to a September 20 start, Wimbledon cancelled and the tennis season in shutdown, the US Open's status has looked increasingly questionable as its August 31 start date looms ever closer.

After considering and reportedly discarding the idea of moving the tournament to either California or Florida, the USTA has settled on staging the event in New York inside a protective "bubble", possibly without fans.

Under safety protocols proposed for the tournament, players would be confined to a hotel outside of Manhattan and would only be allowed to bring one member of their entourage to the event.

Singles qualifying would be eliminated while the doubles tournaments would be drastically reduced from 64 pairings to just 24. The ATP/WTA Cincinnati Masters event could also be shifted to New York as a lead-in tournament.

"This is the world we are living in," USTA's director of player relations Eric Butorac told ATP and WTA players during a conference call on Wednesday.

"We believe this is a good plan and believe it is good for the sport. It's good for the tennis economy, creates jobs for you, for coaches, for commentators, for so many people. "And most importantly, this plan keeps you safe."

MISSION 'IMPOSSIBLE'

So far, however, those words of reassurance have failed to quell unease amongst some of the international tennis circuit's biggest names.

World number one Novak Djokovic said the proposed safety measures and restrictions on the numbers of support staff were problematical.

"We would not have access to Manhattan, we would have to sleep in hotels at the airport, to be tested twice or three times per week," Djokovic said.

"Also, we could bring one person to the club, which is really impossible. "I mean, you need your coach, then a fitness trainer, then a physiotherapist." Djokovic said most players he had spoken to had "a rather negative view" about playing in New York, and predicted some would instead switch to the delayed clay court season instead. — AFP

Sports

Record-breaking Dries Mertens sends Napoli to Italian Cup final

Napoli will face Juventus in Wednesday's final in Rome

ROME: Dries Mertens fired Napoli to the Italian Cup final on Saturday after netting the goal which gave his side a 2-1 aggregate semi-final win over Inter Milan and made him the club's all-time top scorer.

Napoli will face Juventus in Wednesday's final in Rome thanks to Belgium forward Mertens, who slotted home his 122nd goal for Napoli four minutes before half-time to make the score 1-1 on the night and give them overall victory after a 1-0 first-leg win at the San Siro in February.

Christian Eriksen had levelled the tie for Inter straight from a corner in the second minute and the away side continued to dominate the first half, but Mertens ended a lightning counter-attack to put the hosts through at the Stadio San Paolo.

"We wanted the final at all costs and we achieved that. Now we need to recuperate and be ready for the final in a few days," said Lorenzo Insigne, who set up Merten's winner.

Mertens, 33, overtakes Marek Hamsik and moves seven clear of Diego Maradona, who scored 115 goals in all competitions and won two Serie A titles and the UEFA Cup over his seven tumultuous years in southern Italy.

Although there were no fans in the stands at the San Paolo, public broadcaster RAI reported that a small number of Napoli supporters that had gathered outside the San Paolo set off fireworks throughout half-time in celebration of Merten's goal and after the match.

Mertens moved to Napoli from PSV Eindhoven in 2013 and has become so settled in Naples that

fans have nicknamed him 'Ciro', a hugely common Neapolitan name. Sporting director Christian Giuntoli said pre-match that both club and player want to extend his contract, set to expire at the end of the month.

Napoli will take on Juve at the Italian capital's Stadio Olimpico after Maurizio Sarri's side squeezed past AC Milan on away goals following a 0-0 draw in Turin on Friday, Italy's first competitive football match since the country became the global coronavirus epicentre.

OSPINA FENDS OFF INTER

As with Friday's match, Napoli and Inter players gathered around the centre circle for a minute's silence in tribute to the more than 34,000 people who have died in Italy as a result of COVID-19.

There will likely be a big television audience for two of Italy's best-supported clubs. According to Italian media, some 8.3 million people tuned into RAI to watch Friday's

goalless draw at Juve's Allianz Stadium, the largest TV audience for a football match this season.

They were immediately thrown into the action thanks to Eriksen, whose near-post cross from a corner flashed past a host of players and squirmed under a surprised David Ospina in the Napoli goal.

Inter then dominated for long stretches of the first half, and should have gone two ahead on the night seconds before Mertens struck when Antonio Candreva opted to shoot, forcing a good save from Ospina, with three teammates ready for a pass in the box.



NAPLES: Napoli's Senegalese defender Kalidou Koulibaly (L) works around Inter Milan's Belgian forward Romelu Lukaku during the Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) semi-final second leg football match Napoli vs Inter Milan on June 13, 2020 at the San Paolo stadium in Naples. —AFP

Ospina was then crucial to Napoli going ahead in the tie, as it was his quick pass which sent Insigne scurrying towards the Inter area. The Italy international drew defenders towards him before releasing a perfect pass for Mertens, who stroked home first time under Samir Handanovic.

Ospina kept a powerful Inter side at bay with some super goalkeeping to make up for his early blunder, the Colombian making two excellent stops

from Eriksen in five minutes towards the end.

The second, in the 82nd minute, came after a flowing move in which substitute Alexis Sanchez found Eriksen with a lovely backheeled pass, laying on the Dane for a golden chance to take the tie to penalties.

However there was another bum note for Ospina after his best game for Napoli, as his late booking for time wasting means he will miss the final. —AFP

EPL's international appeal faces coronavirus test

LONDON: When the 100 day-wait for Premier League football comes to an end on Wednesday, the anticipation will be felt as keenly in Mumbai and Beijing as in Manchester and Birmingham.

The global reach of the English top-flight has helped secure its position as the wealthiest league in world football. The Premier League's overseas television rights deals for the 2019-2022 three-season cycle hit a record £4.2 billion (\$5.3 billion) and another £2 billion deal has already been struck for Scandinavian rights between 2022 and 2028.

That income will be all the more welcome, with uncertainty over when supporters will be allowed back into stadiums and commercial revenues expected to tumble in a global economic crisis.

However, without the atmosphere generated by baying fans, the Premier League's appeal may be diminished in football's new normal. "What makes it special in England is the way people react to the game," former Arsenal manager and FIFA's chief of global football development Arsene Wenger told The Athletic.

"It is the best country in the world for the way the fans respond to what's happening on the pitch. That's why I think it will be the most handi-

capped championship without that."

RESCHEDULE REBATE

The need to cram the remaining 92 games of the season into a five-and-a-half week window also means many more midweek games with evening kick-offs in England, forcing fans in the Far East to tune in during the early hours.

Overseas broadcasters will be compensated with a reported £107 million rebate due to the change in scheduling.

However, the excitement over the Premier League's return endures, particularly among the huge number of Liverpool fans, many of whom are awaiting a first league title in their lifetimes.

Jurgen Klopp's men are just two wins away from being crowned champions of England for the first time in 30 years.

Hu Zhifei, a 26-year-old journalist and member of Liverpool's official fan club in Beijing, had planned a trip to see his heroes in action in February that was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"Nobody is anticipating the league's restart more than Liverpool fans because we are within two wins of the title," said Hu, who will tune in to watch the Reds via internet streaming despite kick-offs in the early hours.

Excitement is also building in India, where the Premier League has built up a strong following among urban youth in a traditionally cricket-obsessed nation.

"Finally I'll watch some live EPL action. I have already chalked out a schedule for these matches,"

Former Pakistan captain Afridi contracts virus

KARACHI: Pakistan's well-loved former cricket captain Shahid Afridi said on Saturday he had tested positive for coronavirus, as the pandemic accelerates across the country.

The 40-year-old all-rounder, known for towering sixes and distinctive celebrations after taking a wicket as a bowler, revealed his illness on Twitter.

"I've been feeling unwell since Thursday: my body had been aching badly. I've been tested and unfortunately I'm covid positive," Afridi said.

"Need prayers for a speedy recovery, Inshallah (God willing)," added Afridi, who still has a huge global fan base. His 22-year Pakistan career took off when he smashed a 37-ball hundred in only his second one-day international, against Sri Lanka in Nairobi in 1996.

Afridi still holds the record for the most sixes in one-day internationals, hitting 351 in 398 matches. Since retiring from international cricket two

years ago, Afridi has been active in charity work through his own foundation.

He has been providing food donations to people in remote areas of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces hit by the impact of the virus and the lockdown.

"I am happy to serve my people but I am doing all precautions with mask and disinfection so it's a risk worth taking," he told AFP last week.

"These are very hard times on humanity across the world..." The Pakistan Cricket Board and fellow former players were quick to offer their support to Afridi.

"Brother your services to our homeland especially in the last few months are forever etched in our hearts," tweeted long time team-mate Shoaib Malik.

"We all know the fighter that you are, sending all the prayers possible, wish you a speedy recovery and good health." Another former team-mate Mohammad Hafeez described Afridi as a "fighter by nature" in a message of support.

Meanwhile Pakistan head coach Misbah-ul-Haq wished Afridi a speedy recovery during a conference call ahead of a tour of England set to



QUETTA: File photo taken on May 4, 2020, Pakistan's cricketer Shahid Afridi (C) distributes dry food rations to family members of policemen, who died in service, during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Quetta. Pakistan's well-loved former cricket captain Shahid Afridi on June 13 said he had tested positive for coronavirus. —AFP

start in August.

"My prayers are with him, all well wishes with him that he gets out of this soon," he said. "I think he was doing a lot of work in the area of Balochistan and the northern areas just to help the people. Throughout the COVID situation he was helping

the poor, doing a very good job."

Supporters have also rallied round Afridi on social media. "You have faced many challenges in cricket and we have seen you come out on top and this virus is no different, smash it out of the park & get well soon," tweeted one fan. —AFP

Qazi Ahmad Masood, a 17-year-old student, told AFP, "I would love to see my favourite club Liverpool lift the trophy."

'FAST AND EXCITING'

One of the difficulties that lies ahead for the Premier League's brand will be to maintain the intensity of competition on the field in echoing, empty stadiums.

"The Premier League is fast and exciting and no matter whether it is a strong or weak team, the games are great to watch," said Hu.

Fans watching at home will be offered pre-recorded fan noise dubbed over the action to compensate for the real thing. "There is something about the legend that is English football that is all about noise and atmosphere and proximity," Simon Chadwick, director of Eurasian sport at Emlyon business school in France told AFP.

"That spectacle, the product, the noise, the atmosphere, the experience won't necessarily be there." However, by overcoming a series of obstacles just to get back playing in the country that is the worst-hit by coronavirus in Europe, the Premier League is confident it will not lose ground in the long run against the Bundesliga, La Liga or Serie A in the battle for viewers across the globe.

"We know it won't be the same without our loyal supporters in stadiums but, together with our broadcast partners, we are able to ensure fans can watch or listen to each match live from home," said the Premier League's chief executive Richard Masters. —AFP

Zidane tells Real to adopt WCup mentality for La Liga finish

MADRID: Zinedine Zidane wants Real Madrid to treat their remaining 11 games in La Liga like a World Cup as they aim to overhaul Barcelona to win their second league title in eight years.

Real sit two points behind Barca and return after three months away against Eibar on Sunday, when they will play in their new training ground home at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium.

La Liga is due to finish on July 19, meaning there will be fixtures every day while clubs will be in action almost every three days for five and a half weeks.

Asked if felt like the start of a World Cup, Zidane said on Saturday: "I like the comparison, I buy into it. My players know what it's like to play in the final stages of a World Cup or European Championship."

"The important thing is the preparation and I think we have prepared very, very well. Our first match starts tomorrow and we will give everything. I have faith what we have done with the players and now we have to show it on the field."

La Liga matches are being played behind closed doors because of the coronavirus pandemic, although league president Javier Tebas has said stadiums could be allowed to be 10 to 15 per cent full before the end of the season.

"I don't like playing without fans, that's my opinion," Zidane said. "But as always, we have to adapt. This is the situation. There is a government with people who do their work and we have to do ours."

Real are playing at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium to allow renovation work to continue at the Santiago Bernabeu this summer.

The capacity is only 6,000 which would mean far fewer fans could attend if the ban is relaxed.

"My players want to play in front of an audience and right now, there isn't one," Zidane said. "But if those in charge say we can, well then we'll see. I have been a player and I prefer to play with fans. But it is not an excuse, we are going to play well."

Eden Hazard has been included in the squad to face Eibar after he was able to use the break to recover from a foot injury and Marco Asensio is also available again after rupturing his cruciate ligaments last year.

But Zidane said striker Luka Jovic could miss the run-in after injuring his foot at home and Lucas Vazquez is also out. —AFP

September IPL in S Lanka is viable option: Gavaskar

NEW DELHI: Batting great Sunil Gavaskar said the Indian Premier League could be staged in Sri Lanka

in September with Australia's chances of hosting the Twenty20 World Cup in October looking bright.

The Twenty20 international showpiece is scheduled to take place from October 18 to November 19 but had been under threat because of the coronavirus pandemic.

However, Australia's decision to allow crowds of up to 10,000 in sports stadiums from June has breathed life into the staging of the tournament, with the International Cricket Council set to make a

decision next month.

"If the ICC believes that the World T20 can happen, then having the IPL looks difficult because it could only be held if the World T20 is postponed," the former India captain told local television channel Aaj Tak.

"But after the announcement (of opening the stadiums for fans by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison), the IPL in October looks difficult."

Indian cricket chiefs are desperately trying to sal-

vage the cash-rich IPL this year even if it means taking it overseas or playing in empty stands.

IPL chairman Brijesh Patel said the league could be moved out of India if the virus threat does not ease in the next two months. The league has earmarked a possible September-October window for the event.

With the monsoon expected to bring heavy rains to India in September, staging a shortened version of the competition in Sri Lanka that month could be a viable option, Gavaskar said. —AFP

18 Schauffele seizes one-shot lead in PGA Tour return at Colonial



19 Record-breaking Dries Mertens sends Napoli to Italian Cup final



19 Former Pakistan captain Afridi contracts virus



Messi caps Barcelona win on La Liga return

Victory extends Barca's advantage to five points over Real Madrid



PALMA DE MALLORCA: Real Mallorca's Ghanaian midfielder Iddrisu Baba (R) heads the ball in front of Barcelona's German goalkeeper Marc-Andre Ter Stegen during the Spanish League football match between RCD Mallorca and FC Barcelona at the Visit Mallorca stadium (Son Moix stadium) in Palma de Mallorca on June 13, 2020. — AFP

MADRID: Lionel Messi returned without a beard and with a goal and two assists as Barcelona resumed their La Liga title challenge on Saturday with a thumping 4-0 victory over Real Mallorca.

After three months away because of the coronavirus pandemic, Barca exploded into the lead with just 64 seconds played when Arturo Vidal headed in and Martin Braithwaite struck a second from a Messi headed assist.

Jordi Alba latched onto a Messi pass to add a third but not before play was briefly stopped by a pitch invader, who was able to run on, despite the match being closed to fans. Messi then scored a fourth in injury time for his 25th goal of the season.

"I'm happy because starting like this is an enormous boost for what's to come," said Barcelona coach Quique Setien. Victory extends Barca's advantage at the top of La Liga to five points over Real Madrid, who can reduce the gap back to two when they restart at home to Eibar later. La Liga's first match back came on Thursday between Sevilla and Real Betis, with teams scheduled to each play their remaining 11 matches of the season in less than six weeks. Messi will be crucial to Barcelona's

hopes of holding off Madrid but their captain, who turns 33 this month, may have to pace himself, especially after an injury-interrupted season. Clean shaven, and without any sign of the thigh problem that prevented him from training earlier this month, Messi played 90 minutes and looked like he had never been away.

His goal was set up by Luis Suarez and the sight of the Uruguayan coming off the bench would have been welcome for coach Setien too. Suarez has not played since undergoing knee surgery in January and was able to recover during the suspension. He could play an important part in the run-in.

Asked what pleased him most, Setien said: "The satisfaction of seeing Luis again on the field. You have to admire the performance he gave in those 35 minutes that he played. Starting like this is very important for him and for the team as well."

Mallorca, who sit 18th in La Liga, were never going



Enormous boost

to offer the sternest of tests but this was a useful outing for both Barcelona's fitness and morale. Before matches were suspended in Spain because of coronavirus on March 12, Barca had regained top spot but only after being convincingly beaten by Madrid the week before.

This performance suggests time away might have done them good and it remains to be seen now how Madrid respond. Madrid's next four matches all come after their title rivals have played first. Barcelona were in front after just over a minute as Frenkie de Jong did well to recover the ball from a loose touch before Alba sent a deep cross to the arriving Vidal, who headed in. Mallorca were under relentless pressure as Braithwaite and Messi both went close to adding a second. Mallorca's Takefusa Kubo, on loan from Real Madrid, forced a good save out of Marc-Andre ter Stegen on the break.

But Barca scored a second before half-time as an

Alba cross span up and both De Jong and then Messi feathered headers across for Braithwaite to bang in on the half-volley, his first goal for the club.

Both teams eased off in the second period and there were smiles on the Barcelona players' faces when a pitch invader ran on in the 52nd minute wearing an Argentina shirt. He posed for a picture with Alba before being escorted away. Alba added a third after finishing off Messi's clipped ball over the top and then Messi grabbed a goal himself. Suarez fooled his marker by letting the ball run across his body and Messi weaved inside where he could unleash with his right foot.

Mallorca's defeat, combined with losses for Leganes and Celta Vigo, made it the perfect day for Espanyol, who made up ground on their relegation rivals by beating Alaves. Chinese striker Wu Lei, who tested positive for coronavirus in March, scored on his first game back to seal a 2-0 victory and put Espanyol within three points of safety. They are now level on points with Leganes, who lost 2-1 at home to Real Valladolid, and three behind Celta, who conceded in the 91st minute for a 1-0 defeat by Villarreal. — AFP

Goretzka winner puts Bayern within one win of Bundesliga title

BERLIN: Bayern Munich moved to within just one win of an eighth straight Bundesliga title as a late Leon Goretzka goal sealed a 2-1 victory over Borussia Moenchengladbach at the Allianz Arena on Saturday.

Teenage striker Joshua Zirkzee put Bayern ahead before Benjamin Pavard's own goal levelled for Gladbach, but Goretzka netted his third goal in five league games with four minutes remaining.

Even without the suspended Robert Lewandowski and Thomas Mueller, Bayern earned their 13th straight win in all competitions to re-establish their seven-point lead over Borussia Dortmund at the top of the table with three matches left.

Victory at relegation-threatened Werder Bremen on Tuesday will confirm Bayern as German champions for the 30th time in Hansi Flick's first season in charge.

"I'm happy that the team got the job done with some hard work — those were three important, 'big' points," said Flick. Second-placed Dortmund had earlier trimmed Bayern's lead to four points when Erling Braut Haaland's last-gasp header grabbed a dramatic 1-0 win at Fortuna Dueseldorf. Bayern had to dig deep again, having also laboured to victory by the same margin in Wednesday's German Cup semi-final win over Eintracht Frankfurt.

Gladbach made a fast start but were denied an early lead as Jonas Hofmann's strike was ruled out for offside. But visiting goalkeeper Yann Sommer gifted Bayern a 26th-minute advantage when his dreadful pass across the edge of his area was met by the 19-year-old Zirkzee, who coolly found the net to score his fourth Bundesliga goal from just eight appearances.

Gladbach deservedly drew level though when Pavard turned Patrick Herrmann's cross into his own net eight minutes before the break. Both sides had second-half chances, but Goretzka settled matters when he turned

home Pavard's low cross.

Earlier, Dortmund were heading towards a frustrating draw at relegation-threatened Fortuna when Haaland headed home centre-back Manuel Akanji's cross in the 95th minute. "It's a bit of a lucky thing that we were able to walk away with the win today," admitted Dortmund goalkeeper Roman Buerki. With time almost up, Haaland, who returned from injury as a second-half substitute, flicked a header into the bottom corner for his 14th goal in 15 games since joining Dortmund from Salzburg in January. Dortmund had endured a nervous final 10 minutes as Dueseldorf substitute Steven Skrzybski twice hit the post and fired wide before Haaland struck.

Haaland's goal, coupled with Bayern's win, ensured Dortmund qualified for next season's Champions League group stage. Dueseldorf, who occupy the relegation play-off spot, are now only ahead of second-bottom Werder Bremen on goal difference following their 5-1 thumping of Paderborn.

Bremen, who have spent more seasons in the Bundesliga than any other club, responded to back-to-back home defeats with an emphatic away victory in pouring

rain as Davy Klaassen netted either side of a goal by Japanese forward Yuya Osako in the first half.

Maximilian Eggstein made it four with only an hour gone, after Bremen forward Milot Rashica also had a penalty saved, before Abdelhamid Sabiri scored a consolation for rock-bottom Paderborn.

Bremen substitute Niclas Füllkrug capped a fairy-tale return from a serious knee injury when he slotted home the fifth goal late on. Paderborn are now mathematically certain to finish in the bottom three.

Ten-man Hertha Berlin suffered a 4-1 thrashing at home by Eintracht Frankfurt after defender Dedryck Boyata was sent off on the stroke of half-time for bringing down Bas Dost. Krzysztof Piatek gave Hertha an early lead, but Frankfurt roared back with a goal from Dost, two from Portuguese forward Andre Silva and one for French defender Evan N'Dicka. Freiburg came from two goals down to earn a 2-2 draw at Wolfsburg in a game which saw the hosts' striker Wout Weghorst have two goals disallowed by VAR. Union Berlin pulled away from the relegation places with their first victory since February, winning 2-1 at Cologne. — AFP