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# Flights suspended from 7 nations amid 3 new cases of coronavirus

Worldwide cases hit 100,000 • Saudi limits arrivals, reopens Kaaba area • Iran MP dies

## Eight children killed in horrific house fire

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Eight children died of suffocation after a fire gutted a house in Sabah Al-Ahmad yesterday. Firemen rushed to the scene after receiving an emergency call at 5:05 pm and rescued the children - aged between 14 years and eight months - from inside the house. They were all in very critical condition, and later died in hospital, the Kuwait Fire Service Directorate said in a statement. An investigation has been opened into the incident.



KUWAIT: Video grab shows flames shooting out of the window of a house in Sabah Al-Ahmad yesterday.

KUWAIT: The health ministry announced yesterday the discovery of three new cases of coronavirus in the last 24 hours, as the number of COVID-19 cases topped 100,000 worldwide. Health Ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad indicated that all of the previously announced cases were in compulsory quarantine, adding that all of them recently returned from Iran. The number of those infected with the virus has reached 61 with one case of recovery thus far. The health ministry denied rumors that one of the critical cases had died.

Kuwait also suspended all flights to and from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Bangladesh, Philippines, India, and Sri Lanka for a week starting yesterday, the civil aviation directorate announced. Kuwait also banned the entry of anyone who has been in the seven countries in the last two weeks except for Kuwaitis coming from the seven countries, who will be allowed entry but will have to submit to quarantine procedures, the civil aviation directorate added.

Saudi Arabia limited yesterday land crossings with the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Bahrain to commercial trucks only, with arrivals from the three countries temporarily limited to three airports as a precaution taken over the spread of the coronavirus, Saudi news agency SPA reported. The three airports are King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, and King Fahd International Airport in Dammam, SPA added.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia reopened yesterday the area around the sacred Kaaba in Makkah's Grand

Continued on Page 24



MAKKAH: Worshippers circumambulate the sacred Kaaba in the Grand Mosque yesterday. — AFP

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## Local

## Kuwait Fights Coronavirus

# Polyclinic requests backup to test expats returning to Kuwait for COVID-19 infection

## Search for unidentified shooter who targeted cop in Kabd

By A Saleh

**KUWAIT:** Subhan polyclinic recently called for backup to help control crowds of recent expat returnees wishing to undergo precautionary medical tests, the Health Ministry said yesterday. This came in response to inquiries that many expats made after being told when they returned to Kuwait from abroad that they had to undergo tests to confirm they are free from the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) infection. "Expatriates were transferred to the Subhan polyclinic after they initially went to the Rabiya and Ishbiliya polyclinics to undergo necessary medical tests as a precautionary measure related to travel," the ministry wrote on its social media accounts. Photos and video footage showing large crowds of people waiting in line outside the Subhan polyclinic circulated on social media yesterday, as hundreds of expats, mostly Egyptians, returned to Kuwait before a one-week ban on flights from their countries kicked in yesterday. Kuwait suspended all flights to and from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Bangladesh, Philippines, India, and Sri Lanka for a week starting yesterday, and that two days after it suspended a decision which required travelers from said countries to conduct Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests at certified clinics before coming to Kuwait.

### Unidentified shooter

A policeman was shot at while driving along Kabd

highway, said security sources, noting that the unidentified shooter was chasing the policeman's vehicle when he pointed a gun at him and fired a few shots, including one that hit the driver's seat without injuring the policeman. The policeman filed a complaint providing detectives with the shooter's vehicle license plate number. A case was filed and further investigations are in progress.

### Booths regulation

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) yesterday issued a decision organizing temporary sale outlets (booths) in the terms of the conditions needed to get related licenses. According to the new regulations, no booths will be allowed without prior licenses from MoCI's concerned department. The new regulations said only companies and individuals already licensed by MoCI to practice certain commercial activities will be licensed to have their own temporary booths.

MoCI added that interested licensees will apply with full data including copies of their commercial licenses, layout of the location and the approvals of the complex and the municipality. MoCI also noted that licenses would be valid for a maximum 12 renewable months according to what the ministry deems fit and warned that the outlet or booth will be immediately closed in case of violating the abovementioned regulations and conditions.



**KUWAIT:** A photo which circulated on social media yesterday shows a large crowd standing in line outside the Subhan polyclinic for precautionary medical tests.

## local spotlight

## Securing ports



By Muna Al-Fuzal

Muna@kuwaittimes.net

Last week, I like many others was calling on the government to take all necessary measures to protect the population in Kuwait from the risk of the spread of the coronavirus. One of those popular demands was the closure of air links with countries where there are cases of persons infected with the coronavirus. I think this procedure is important for the entire population, whether citizens or expatriates, because the risk of transmission of the virus from one person to another has no limits.

So keeping the ports open in a country like Kuwait, where the number of resident expatriates exceeds three million versus a million citizens means that there is a high possibility of transmitting the infection. Not only this, but it also means providing administrative and medical procedures, suitable quarantine, medical and nursing staff and equipment too.

The civil aviation authority issued a circular last week (which was later rescinded by the Kuwaiti Cabinet) for all foreign travelers coming from Egypt, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Syria, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Georgia, and Lebanon, to conduct a medical examination to confirm that they are free of the coronavirus before they enter Kuwait, and the examination must be conducted by health centers accredited by the Kuwaiti embassy or local authorities in countries where Kuwait does not have embassies.

The announcement stated that in the event that a virus-free certificate is not carried, the passenger would be prevented from entering Kuwait and deported on the same carrier without the state bearing any financial costs, and the airline would be fined for violating this circular. As for the citizens of Kuwait coming from these countries, they will be allowed entry, provided that the necessary quarantine procedures are applied.

Flights to and from China, Hong Kong, Iran, South Korea, Thailand, Italy, Singapore, Japan and Iraq have been suspended temporarily. However, on Thursday, the Council of Ministers issued a decision to suspend the precautionary measures that were intended to be applied to Egyptians heading to Kuwait, which includes a certified examination to confirm being free of the coronavirus.

I think that the Kuwaiti government may have justifications for this step, as the Egyptian community in Kuwait is the largest Arab community, most of whom work in jobs in the government and private sector, including teachers, judges and engineers. In light of the decision to return to work after the national holidays, it is natural that there is a need for employment, but this does not mean ignoring the obligation to carry out mandatory testing for the coronavirus and not allowing any person to continue work without that certificate and presenting it to their supervisors at their workplaces, because the presence of an infected person means that many people may contract the disease, especially teachers who are likely to mix with children and other teachers. A compulsory medical examination is required and should not be ignored.

As fears rise of the proliferation of coronavirus around the world, scientists warn that the new virus may become "permanent" or "seasonal", meaning that it will not disappear at all. Some experts have warned that it could turn into a permanent disease like the cold and seasonal flu. Coronavirus is a threat to the general public, therefore, most countries have formed plans and strategies to reduce and confront it to limit its spread, and control it as much as possible and protect societies from it according to studied mechanisms.

## Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait has so far recorded 61 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), all of which are Kuwaiti patients who returned to the country from Iran. With the exception of two cases Kuwaiti women in their 70s who have been admitted to the intensive care unit with pneumonia, all cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while two people have been discharged after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, a 34-year-old Kuwaiti man has recovered completely after previously been infected with the virus, the ministry said. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested over 3,100 people, the overwhelming majority of them have returned from Iran.

### Countries' ban list

As a precautionary measure against the spread of the virus, Kuwait has suspended flights from and to the following countries:

- China
- Hong Kong
- Singapore
- Thailand
- South Korea
- Japan
- Italy
- Iraq
- Iran

In the meantime, Kuwait sent charter flights to bring back Kuwaitis from infected areas, mainly Iran, Italy and Thailand, and test them before entering the country. Meanwhile, authorities have stopped issuing all kinds of visas (visit, work, etc) for Egyptian nationals, while allowing those who already have a visa to enter only after they take tests in Cairo before coming to Kuwait. In the meantime, Iraq has suspended flights from Kuwait, whereas Saudi Arabia stopped issuing umrah visas for all nationalities as a precautionary measures. Furthermore, Kuwait suspended all flights for a week starting March 7 to and from the following countries:

- Egypt
- Lebanon
- Syria
- Bangladesh
- Philippines
- India
- Sri Lanka

This came two days after Kuwait suspended a decision which required travelers to conduct Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests at certified clinics before coming to Kuwait from the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Syria, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Georgia, and Lebanon.

### Precautions

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. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended classes for the first two weeks of March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs). In the meantime, the Civil Service Commission suspended the biometric fingerprint system for staff attendance until further notice.

### 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)



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Interior Ministry yesterday called on motorists to exercise caution due to dusty weather and strong wind which hit Kuwait and caused low visibility in some areas. —Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Local

# Kuwait tightens curbs on coronavirus spread

Govt keen on citizens' safety: Speaker Ghanem



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's emergency meeting on Friday. — KUNA photos



(From left) Ministers of Commerce Khaled Al-Roudhan, Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah and Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah.

**KUWAIT:** The Kuwaiti government decided to tighten controls on flights to and from countries hit by novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreaks. During its emergency meeting, held at Al-Seif Palace on Friday night under the chairmanship of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, the Cabinet reviewed the measures adopted to stem the spread of COVID-19 and protect the safety of public health. His Highness the Prime Minister briefed the Cabinet members on the efforts to provide the competent authorities with all resources necessary for protecting the safety of the health of citizens and expatriates in Kuwait, said Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Anas Al-Saleh following the meeting.

Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Humoud Al-Sabah, who leads the inter-agency taskforce on COVID-19, briefed the meeting on latest figures of global outbreak of the epidemic and the related reports on its impact worldwide. The Cabinet members appreciated the selfless efforts being made by the frontline medical workers who pursue their humanitari-

an mission restlessly. They reviewed the precautions relating to the airlines working in the country adopted since the emergence of the epidemic in January, including the suspension of flights to and from China, Hong Kong, Iran, South Korea, Thailand, Italy, Singapore, Japan and Iraq.

In light of the Cabinet decree, adopted on Thursday, March 5, regarding the safety of foreign communities in Kuwait from the virus, they decided to suspend for one week all flights to and from Bangladesh, the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. All arrivals in Kuwait from any other nationality or via airports other than those of the above-mentioned countries will be denied entry if they travelled to these countries in the last couple of weeks even if they have valid residency or visas. Only Kuwaiti nationals living in those countries will be allowed in after undergoing the necessary quarantine measures, according to tonight's decree. The Cabinet stressed that the new measures are meant to protect the safety of the health of the citizens and expatriate resi-

dents in Kuwait, asking everybody to understand the urgency of these measures.

**Citizens' safety**

Earlier on Friday, Kuwaiti National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem expressed confidence in the government's keenness on making decisions that preserve the health and safety of citizens. Ghanem, in a series of posts on Twitter, called on the government to "take decisions that protect the country's health security in their emergency meeting." He stressed that the health and safe-

ty of citizens in Kuwait is above any other considerations, urging the Cabinet to take decisions that protect the health security of the country. "I spoke to His Highness the Prime Minister, and I am confident that they are (the ministers) keen to take decisions that preserve the health and safety of citizens," he added. Ghanem called for holding a press conference at the ministerial level to clarify some of the issues that were marred by ambiguity for the citizens in all transparency and clarity. He expressed thanks, appreciation and support for all national cadres working in all the con-

cerned authorities.

The Kuwaiti Health Ministry had announced yesterday the discovery of three new cases of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the previous 24 hours. Health Ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad indicated that all of the previously announced cases were in compulsory quarantine, adding that all of them have recently returned from Iran. The number of those infected with the virus reached 61 with one case of recovery thus far. On Friday, the ministry said that no new COVID-19 were recorded in the previous 24 hours. — KUNA



(From left) Ministers of public works Dr Rana Al-Fares, Social Affairs Mariam Al-Aqeel and justice Fahad Al-Afasi.

## Amir directs standing by Iran in face of COVID-19

**KUWAIT:** Wishing its friendly people utmost safety while overcoming the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah on Friday expressed Kuwait's empathy towards what the Islamic Republic is facing, to his Iranian counterpart. In a phone call with its top diplomat Javad Zarif, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Nasser also conveyed His Highness the Amir

of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's directives to stand by Iran in this "difficult" health situation, as well as providing all that is needed to help limit the spread of the novel virus, said a foreign ministry statement. Meanwhile, Minister Zarif expressed the Islamic Republic's sincerest appreciation; both to the Kuwaiti leadership and people, for the benevolent gesture. — KUNA

## Kuwait condemns terrorist attack in Tunisia

**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent a cable of condolences on Friday to Tunisian President Kais Saied, expressing condolences over the suicide attack that targeted the US embassy in Tunis and resulted in a casualty and injuries. His Highness the Amir expressed sorrow over the loss of life, hoping for a speedy recovery to those injured, as well as voicing the State of Kuwait's utter condemnation for such terrorist attack that goes counter to all human values and religious beliefs. His Highness the Amir also sent a cable to US President Donald Trump, where His Highness reiterated utmost denouncement for the attack. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh

Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables on the incident to both presidents.

Kuwait strongly condemned the "terrorist" bombing attack that targeted a security patrol in the Tunisian capital Friday, killing a security man and wounding others. A source from the Foreign Ministry affirmed on the principled position of Kuwait in rejecting all forms of terrorism and violence, stressing that the state of Kuwait is firmly supporting Tunisia in all measures needed to protect its security and stability. The source also expressed sincere condolences to the victim's family and wishes for a speedy recovery to all injured. — KUNA



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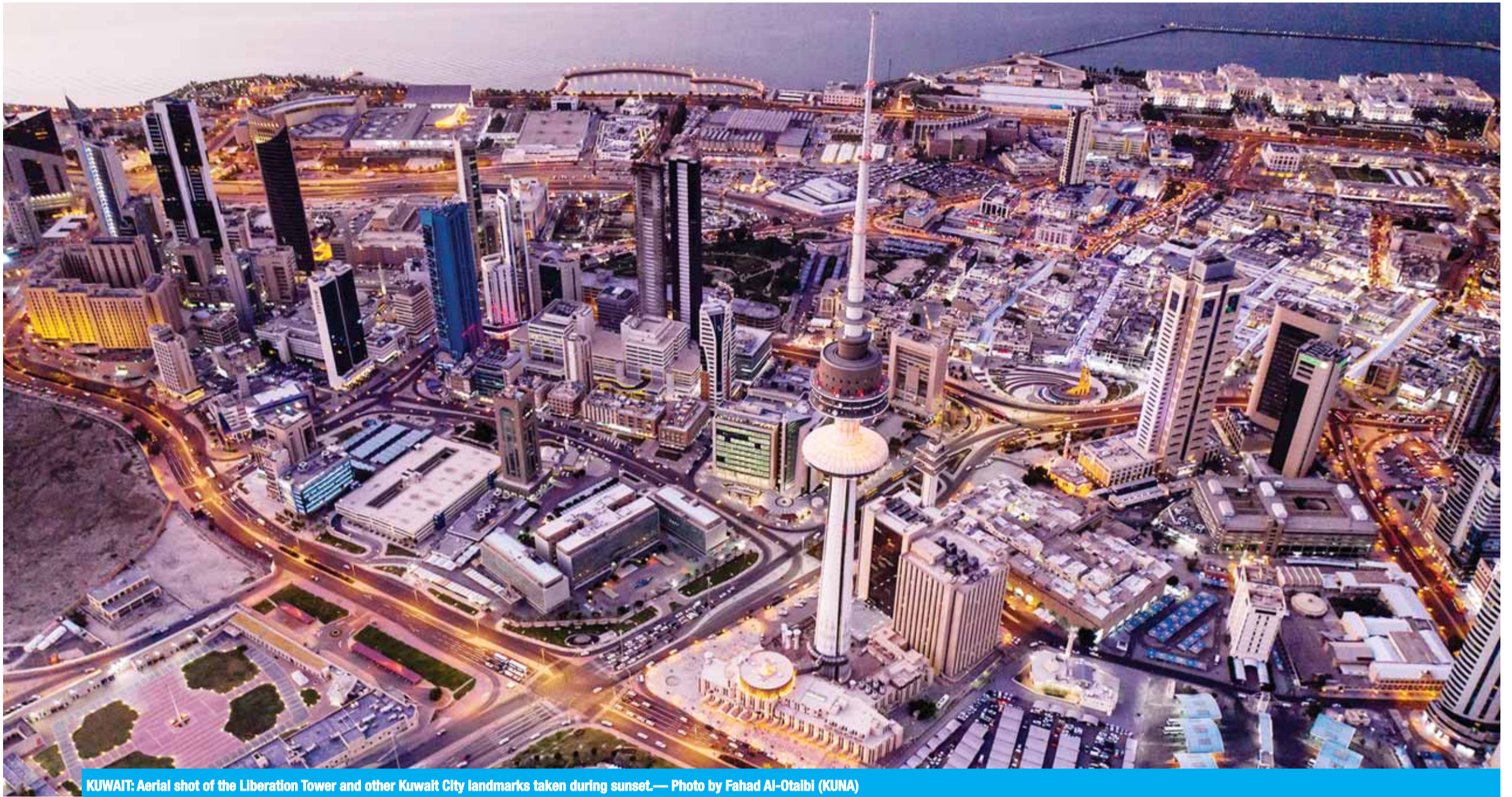
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## Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Aerial shot of the Liberation Tower and other Kuwait City landmarks taken during sunset.— Photo by Fahad Al-Otaibi (KUNA)

# ACK students succeed in technological project competition at Maker Faire

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KUWAIT: First place winners.

KUWAIT: Two groups of engineering students from the Australian College of Kuwait (ACK) were awarded for winning first and third place at the Maker Faire for 'Best Technological Project.' Maker Faire is an annual event for makers to showcase their inventions and designs, and it also includes competitions for makers to compete their creations with others in various fields. This year's Maker Faire is the fourth in the series, and included many different projects from over 12 countries.

Two groups of ACK students took part in the competition and they managed to secure first and third place while competing with 30 other projects. The project that managed to achieve first place for best technological project was "Super Capacitor Assisted Solar Hot Water System." The project was created by students from the ACK Electrical

Engineering department, and was supervised by Dr Alireza Gheitasi, Assistant Professor of Electrical Engineering. The students who worked on the project were Fatemah Al-Huli, Meshal Muzaiel, and Yaqoub Al-Bassam.

As for the project which received third place, it was titled "RF Controlled Robotic Vehicle with Metal Detection." It was designed by a group of Mechanical Engineering students under the supervision of Dr Adel Younes, Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering. The students that completed the project were Ala Omar, Faisal Al Mutairi, and Emad Nuaman. ACK is very proud of its students' achievements and would like to thank Maker Faire for giving its students such a wonderful opportunity to challenge themselves and demonstrate their skills and abilities.

## KFAS co-organizes conference on 'War and Peace'

PARIS: The Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) organized a conference on 'War and Peace' in Paris in cooperation with Science Po University to discuss topics on the role of diplomacy, the dangers of wars, conflicts, anthropology, and climate change. The permanent representative of Kuwait to the UN, Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, participated in the conference held on the fourth and fifth of March to discuss the issue of war and diplomacy with a number of lecturers, most notably the former UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura.

Ambassador Otaibi stressed the importance of the role of the UN, in particular the Security Council assigned under the UN Charter in the service of international peace and security. He underlined the most prominent challenges facing the Council to carry out its tasks and responsibilities, including differences between the five permanent members and the increase in the use of the veto, in addition to other factors. Otaibi stressed on the importance of the UN, which celebrates the 75th anniversary of its establishment as the most important international multilateral body, and the need to preserve it and enhance its role.



PARIS: Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi (second from left) speaks during a seminar organized as part of the conference.— KUNA

Meanwhile, KFAS Member of the Board of Directors, Advisor at the Amiri Diwan, Dr Youssef Al-Ibrahim, affirmed the importance of this conference to generate solidarity for peace in the world. Ibrahim said that the joint program between the KFAS and the University of Science Po, which lasts for more than ten years, aims to organize activities and seminars related to the region and the State of Kuwait. The participating Kuwaiti delegation included KFAS Director-General, Dr Adnan Shihab Al-Deen, and the Deputy Director General for Supportive Programs Dr Amani Al-Baddah, Director of International Relations Youssef Al-Mazidi, Senior Officer of the International Relations Office Dalal Al-Hashash and the Board Member Khaled Al-Khudair. — KUNA

# Kuwait Humanitarian aid continues despite coronavirus outbreak



Kuwaiti Humanitarian Relief Society team pose for group pictures with Syrian refugees. — KUNA photos

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait endeavors to aid all societies experiencing tough situations through financial and other means of support to alleviate them from further suffering. Kuwait-based charity 'Al-Rahma International' initiated a comprehensive humanitarian program geared towards Syrian refugees residing in Jordan, with university students taking part in the endeavor. The five-day program mainly deals with providing healthcare for widows and orphans and conducting intricate surgical procedures on refugees suffering from a wide array of ailments, according to the

director of the charity's office in Syria and Jordan Waleed Al-Suwailem, who pointed out that volunteers doled out aid across camps housing the refugees. Following the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak - which has infected more than tens of thousands of people since it began last December in Wuhan, China - and continues to spread worldwide, the Kuwaiti Cabinet decided to dispatch medical supplies to China to back up the nation's efforts. Kuwait's Ambassador to China Sameh Hayat said in a statement to the press that \$3 million donation would be in

the form of urgent medical aid, to be delivered in coordination with the Chinese government.

The Kuwaiti Humanitarian Relief Society has set up a charitable program that included the distribution of material aid to support the humanitarian situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan in which 42 young Kuwaiti men and women participated. The general manager of the society, Khaled Al-Shemmari, said at the end of the charity program in Jordan that the society distributed 500 baskets of basic foodstuffs to Syrian refugee families, 300 heating

devices and 600 blankets, in addition to providing material support to 50 families and scholarships to three University students and surgery for ten cases. He pointed out that the association's delegation prepared a course in relief and volunteer work through a visit to orphanages in Irbid governorate, northern Amman, and distributed aid to needy families. He also added that the trip included a visit to the schools affiliated with the association, where they held a recreational celebration for 200 Syrian children as part of three celebrations held during the trip. — KUNA



Relief aid part of a humanitarian program initiated by Al-Rahma International for Syrians in Jordan.



VIENNA: Members of the GCC delegations with United Nations Commission on Narcotics Drugs CEO Ghada Wali. — KUNA

## Narcotics control priority for Kuwait's Interior Ministry

**VIENNA:** A Kuwaiti security official affirmed, on Friday, that his country was keen on cooperating with regional and international bodies in the field of narcotics control, reiterating commitment to implement all global agreements concerning this matter. This came in a statement by the director of international control at the drug control department Colonel Fahad Al-Bader after the conclusion of the 63rd session of

the United Nations Commission on Narcotics Drugs (CND). He stated that, during the meeting, most prominent activities and efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) in the drug control were highlighted, praising the role played by the CND in strengthening the capabilities against drugs. The CND was established in February 15, 1946, as an international organization dedicated to the fight against Narcotics. — KUNA



Colonel Fahad Al-Bader



**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) CEO Hashem Hashem visited yesterday the site of the heavy fuel project which is carried out by Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) at Al-Ratqa oilfield north of the country. Hashem oversaw the process of work at the project which is eyed to boost Kuwait's oil production. — KUNA photos



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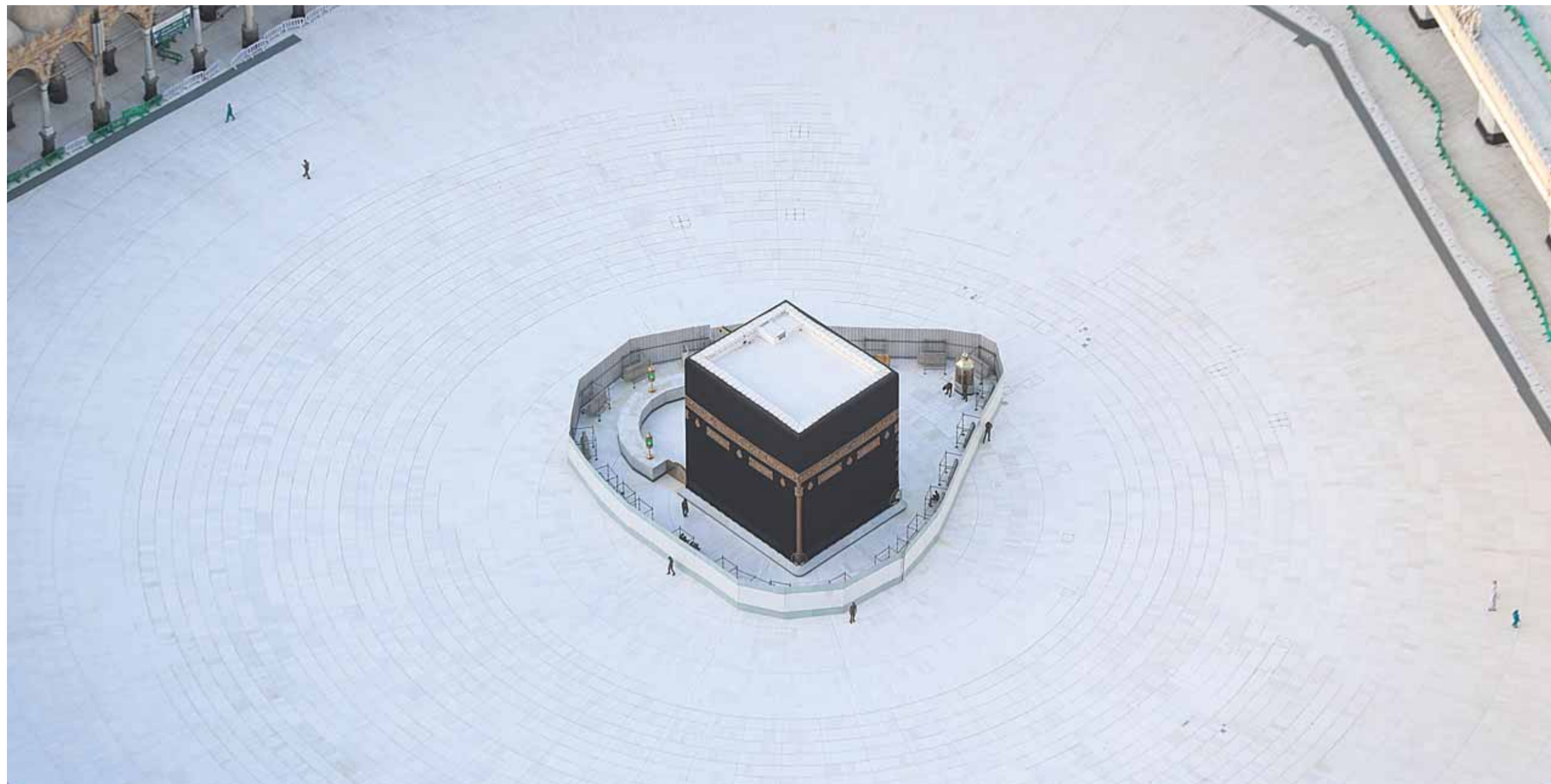


Viruses: Ancient, tiny and amazing

## Pakistan's 'biggest feminist' under fire after sexist tirade

Page 9

Page 8



MAKKAH: An aerial view shows the empty white-tiled area surrounding the Kaaba in the Grand Mosque on Friday. —AFP

# Prayers overshadowed by virus fears

## Imam prays for an end to the epidemic during sermon

**JERUSALEM:** From Jerusalem to Makkah, Muslims across the Middle East held Friday prayers under the shadow of the new coronavirus, with some gatherings cancelled and others subdued because of the deadly outbreak. The highly contagious disease is believed to be transmitted through close contact and authorities globally have moved to restrict large gatherings, including public prayers.

In Makkah, Islam's holiest site was uncrowded after reopening on Friday following disinfection. "The fact that it is empty is very scary," an Egyptian worshipper who has lived in Makkah for more than 20 years said. "I had a very strange and difficult feeling as I was headed to the mosque. I felt deprived of the Kaaba," he said. The area around the Kaaba - a large black cube structure inside Makkah's Grand Mosque - was closed Thursday for sterilization.

Friday prayers at the Grand Mosque normally attract hundreds of thousands of worshippers, while this week only tens of thousands attended. The

mosque's imam prayed for an end to the epidemic during his sermon, while praising Saudi Arabia's decision to suspend the year-round umrah pilgrimage over fears of the new coronavirus. "God, I seek refuge in you from the calamity and the epidemic," said Sheikh Abdullah Awad Al-Juhani.

### Regional epicenter

In Iran, which has the most COVID-19 cases in the region, authorities have faced accusations of mismanaging the response to the outbreak. In total 4,747 cases have been reported in the country, with 124 deaths. Authorities cancelled weekly prayers in Tehran and provincial capitals. In Iraq, prayers were cancelled in the holy Shiite city of Karbala, home of the mausoleum of the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

For the first time since 2003 no one delivered the sermon of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the highest authority for millions of Shiite Muslims. In the city of Najaf,

however, campaigning by Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr forced authorities to re-open the Imam Ali mausoleum, which had been closed for disinfection. The first new coronavirus case in Iraq was identified in Najaf, which attracts millions of Iranian pilgrims annually.

### The Holy Land

In the Palestinian territories, the first seven COVID-19 cases were confirmed Thursday, with a further 19 reported so far in Israel. At Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, weekly prayers proceeded despite the Palestinian government announcing a state of emergency Thursday evening. The mosque is managed by the Jordan Waqf (religious organization), but entrances are controlled by Israel - which has banned gatherings of more than 5,000 people.

An AFP photographer said inside the mosque was full but the large open spaces outside - usually filled

with people - were empty. A number of worshippers wore face masks, the photographer said. "This Friday the number of worshippers is less than last week," said Ammar Juwalis after praying. "It is required of us to pray each Friday. We are trying to be careful about corona," the 35-year-old said. Jerusalem's Old City was unusually quiet at Friday lunchtime, an AFP journalist said, with only a few tourists wandering around, some wearing masks.

In Bethlehem, a Palestinian city about 10 kilometers south of Jerusalem, authorities closed the Church of the Nativity, built on the site where Christians believe Jesus was born. The Palestinian territories' first COVID-19 cases were confirmed in a Bethlehem hotel Thursday, after a group of Greek tourists visited. Israeli authorities have banned tourist buses and visitors from Bethlehem from entering Jerusalem. At Jerusalem's Western Wall, the holiest place where Jews can pray, new restrictions mean that only 5,000 people can visit at a time. —AFP

## Pope goes livestream to fight viral epidemic

**VATICAN CITY:** Pope Francis decided to deliver Sunday's prayer by livestream and Italy called in retired doctors as the new coronavirus epidemic gathered strength and emptied streets in Europe's worst affected country. The 83-year-old pontiff broke with centuries of tradition by enlisting the help of technology to keep crowds from descending on Saint Peter's Square for the traditional Angelus Prayer.

"The prayer will be broadcast via livestream by Vatican News and on screens in Saint Peter's Square," the Vatican said in a statement. It had originally promised to review the Argentine-born pope's schedule "to avoid the dissemination" of the new COVID-19 disease. The Vatican appears to believe that the pope's absence from his traditional spot at the window will keep the crowds on the vast square down and the threat of contagion low. The pope himself has been out of action for more than a week with a cold.

The Vatican is in the process of unrolling unprecedented health precautions designed to keep the city state's 450 mostly elderly residents safe. It recorded its first COVID-19 infection on Thursday and was awaiting the results of a test on another person who appeared at a Vatican-organized event last month. That conference was also attended by Microsoft President Brad Smith and European Parliament President David Sassoli. The Vatican said all those present were being notified about the test as a precaution.

### Coalition leader gets virus

The Italian government finds itself at the forefront of the global fight against an epidemic that has convulsed the markets and paralyzed global supply chains since first emerging in China late last

year. Ministers decided at an all-night emergency meeting to call in retired doctors as part of an effort to bolster the strained healthcare system with 20,000 additional staff.

Italy's death toll ballooned by a single-day record of 49 on Friday and now stands at 197 - the most outside China itself. The head of the Italian ruling coalition's junior partner became the latest high-profile figure to confirm coming down with the new disease. "I am fine," the Democratic Party's Nicola Zingaretti said on Facebook. "I will have to stay home for the next few days."

The accelerating spread of the illness emptied Italian train stations and turned usually thronged parts of Rome into a ghost town. Many of the city's outdoor restaurants and cafes were either closed on Friday night or had free tables overseen by forlorn staff with little to do but chat. The expansive street that runs from Rome's Colosseum along the Forum was deserted and the magnificent ruins stood in their natural splendor - and without being swarmed by tourists - on a sunny Saturday afternoon.

### 'Focus on containment'

The sharp drop in visitor numbers is wreaking havoc with the Italian tourism industry and contributing to fears that the anemic economy is about to tip back into recession. But the government's most immediate concern is the threat of infections that had been largely contained to pockets of the richer north spreading to the poorer and the south where medical services are weaker.

The World Health Organization urged the Italian government on Friday to keep "a strong focus on containment measures". The government said its medical recruitment drive should increase the number of intensive care beds from 5,000 to 7,500 in the coming days. The number of Italians receiving intensive care treatment for COVID-19 reached 462 on Friday. The total number of coronavirus infections grew to 4,636. —AFP

## Worshippers avoid Madrid ritual after statue-kissing banned

**MADRID:** Was it fear of coronavirus? Or disappointment at not being able to kiss the feet of a wooden statue of Christ with a reputation for working miracles? At Madrid's Medinaceli Basilica, worshippers were scarce on Friday for an annual ritual that normally draws thousands. Earlier this week, the Catholic order in charge of this church in the heart of the Spanish capital said pilgrims would be allowed neither to "kiss nor touch the statue of Jesus of Medinaceli" to avoid coronavirus infections which by Friday had reached 365 cases and caused five deaths in Spain. Such restrictions have never been imposed in nearly a century of the tradition which takes place every first Friday in March. Pilgrims come from across Spain to kiss the feet of the life-size 17th-century statue of Christ and make three wishes, with tradition holding that at least one is granted. Popular devotion to the rite is such that some of the faithful even begin queuing a week before the date, camping in the nearby streets, with the entry line on the day itself stretching for many hundreds of metres.

But on Friday morning, only a few dozen people could be seen waiting in the icy wind behind lines of metal barriers erected to corral the non-existent crowds. "You can normally wait here up to 12 or 14 hours," said Amparo Garcia, looking amazed as she gazed at the largely-empty streets that she said would normally be packed out with pilgrims. "You have to take precautions, for sure," this 61-year-old Madrid resident said. "It's fine not to touch (the statue). But the fact that no-one's here? That I've never seen." As usual, she had come down to the basilica before dawn in the expectation she would have to wait until 6:00 pm to get in. But in the end, she only had to wait a few minutes before entering the baroque sanctuary to kneel before the wooden icon and petition him for good health after recovering from cancer.

Inside the church, worshippers - the vast majority older women - take turns to pause before the statue



MADRID: Women wearing protective masks chat after a traditional visit to the Jesus of Medinaceli Church on Friday, days after the church warned against kissing or touching its famous statue of Jesus in light of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. —AFP

whose feet are hidden behind a floor-length purple velvet robe, making the sign of the cross or blowing a kiss before moving on. One or two were wearing face-masks. "The reason fewer people are coming is the panic that has been created about coronavirus," said Benjamin Echevarria, the Capuchin friar who runs the church, saying they had repeatedly made clear there were "many ways to express devotion, not just with a kiss". But for Belen Ibanez, a journalist covering the event for radio Cope, it was more than just virus fears. "It's the end of a tradition that they loved - which is in some part devotion but also fetishism," she told AFP. "And I think part of that tradition is that if you don't kiss the statue, it doesn't work."

Those who are there insist they're not afraid and are not disappointed about being unable to touch the statue that looms over the altar. "We have come with much faith, we have prayed and we have kissed him symbolically," said Maricarmen Perez Martin, a 54-year-old worshipper who has come from Toledo, a city about 75 kilometers south of Madrid. "Jesus will certainly stop the virus." Among the visitors were Spain's former Queen Sofia, mother of King Felipe VI, as well as the mayor of Madrid. With the coronavirus epidemic causing mounting infections every day, it is likely there will further bans imposed in the run up to Easter when there are a string of ceremonies involving the faithful kissing the feet or hands of statues during Catholic rituals. —AFP

## International

# Bethlehem under lockdown after virus cases confirmed

## Palestinians record first cases of the deadly coronavirus

**BETHLEHEM:** The city of Bethlehem was under lockdown yesterday after the first Palestinian cases of the deadly coronavirus were discovered there and authorities announced a state of emergency. Palestinian Health Minister Mai al-Kaila said a total of 16 cases of the COVID-19 illness had been detected in the Israeli-occupied West Bank after nine new cases were discovered in Bethlehem, official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported Friday evening.

The Palestinian government announced a month-long state of emergency late Thursday after the first seven cases were identified, while the Israeli defense ministry said it had imposed emergency measures on Bethlehem, with everybody "forbidden from entering or leaving the city". It added that the lockdown had been imposed "in coordination with the Palestinian Authority".

The Church of the Nativity, built on the site Christians believe was the birthplace of Jesus, was closed on Thursday and along with other sites is expected to be shuttered for a month. All tourist buses to and from Bethlehem were banned until further notice, Israeli police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said. An AFP journalist saw around 20 buses stuck at a checkpoint run by Israeli personnel at the entrance to the Palestinian city, which is around 10 kilometers south of Israeli-controlled Jerusalem.

Witnesses said some tourists in Bethlehem were trying to bypass military controls in order to reach Jerusalem. The streets of Bethlehem and Ramallah, where the Palestinian government is based, were nearly empty on Friday morning, with most shops closed, AFP journalists said. Israel controls all entrances to the West Bank from the Jewish state but the Palestinian govern-

ment has limited autonomy in cities.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh made a special broadcast late Thursday to announce the 30-day lockdown, saying the measures were essential to contain the disease. All but essential travel between Palestinian governorates was now prohibited, while all schools and educational facilities would close, he said. Public parks and tourist sites would close while large sporting events, conferences and other major gatherings were cancelled, Shtayyeh added. The Palestinian health ministry said the cases had first been detected at a hotel in the Bethlehem area.

### Church of Nativity disinfected

The emergency measures came after the first Palestinian cases were confirmed Thursday afternoon. The seven people initially found to be infected were being treated in quarantine, the Palestinian health ministry had said. The head of the local health directorate, Imad Shahadeh, told AFP that a group of Greek tourists had visited the hotel in late February, with two later diagnosed with the virus. A number of suspected cases have since been identified among hotel workers, he said.

Asbed Balian, senior cleric of the Armenian Church at the Church of the Nativity, said infected visitors had entered the site. "People affected by corona visited the church," he said. Workmen began spraying disinfectant inside the church on Thursday evening, an AFP photographer said. COGAT, the Israeli body responsible for civilian activities in the Palestinian Territories, said it was "working closely with the Palestinian Authority" to stem the spread of the virus.

Israel, which so far has 21 confirmed cases, has



**BETT JALA:** Palestinian security forces man a checkpoint in Beit Jala on the outskirts of the biblical city of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank yesterday, currently under lockdown due to the COVID-19 coronavirus. —AFP

imposed stringent measures on many European nations in a bid to contain the virus. It has also scrapped joint military exercises with the United States in Germany.

The Israeli army announced that from noon Friday all forces would be prevented from leaving Israel, whether "on personal trips or on duty". —AFP

## Caught up in Sahel war, Mali villagers flee to uncertainty

**SEVARE:** Two months ago, all 400 inhabitants of the Malian village Toou grabbed a few belongings and fled fighting between armed groups, leaving their homes behind among the ghosts of the country's war. Today, they sleep in an abandoned school in Sevare near the regional capital Mopti, packed into two buildings among vacant lots and a dirt road. The men live in the building to the right; the women and children in the one to the left. Toou's residents have joined a mass of more than a million people displaced by the violence in the centre of the Sahel, in particular in Mali and neighboring Burkina Faso.

"The day is fine, but in the evening, there are people everywhere: here, there, over there and there. There are 10 of us sleeping in the same room," says Housseini Karembé, 65, waving his hand over the cramped living space. Karembé and the others left Toou on January 5 when months of tension between traditional Dogon hunters and jihadists finally reached the village, spelling its doom. Summoned by the jihadists and ordered to leave, the entire village's population - 400 men, women and children - fled with almost nothing, and walked the 26 kilometers to

Sevare through the bush and blazing sun.

Karembé sits, leaning against the wall, in an old classroom where the chalk-marked blackboard is a reminder of the children who once studied there. Beside him crackles an old radio. "We need tents, we can't stay like this in a school," said Karembé, a marabout or village elder, who taught young people the Koran before they fled. After escaping with little more than cooking pots, some are embarrassed about their situation. "We have a roof over our heads and we have something to eat," said one resident. "We mustn't complain too much."

### The growing war

Mali's war erupted in 2012 when Tuareg rebels supported by armed Islamists took over the desert north of the country. The rebels were then outmanoeuvred by their Islamist allies and the French military intervened to push them back. The conflict has since swept into the centre of Mali and spilled into neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger, inflaming ethnic tensions along the way.

More than 5,000 French troops, a regional G5 Sahel military cooperation deal and a UN peacekeeper mission in Mali have not been enough to contain the violence. For Toou's 400 residents, that meant leaving their lives and homes behind. Toou inhabitants receive coupons from the World Food Program each month to buy food. A few pots the group use to cook sit in the school courtyard. "These are the only objects we were able to take when we fled. Things to cook with," says

Tun Nyi, a spokesman for the commander-in-chief's office, told reporters on Friday in a rare press tour to a murky zone of drug production and rebel wars. Myanmar is under pressure to stem the deluge of drugs from its free-wheeling border regions. Shan State is part of the Golden Triangle - a rugged wedge of land cutting into Myanmar, Laos, China and Thailand that is virtually untroubled by authorities despite its prolific production. "This is the biggest seizure of the year... the whole world is fighting drugs," Tun Nyi added.

The haul was worth nearly \$100 million in Myanmar, the army said. But the price of yaba - Southeast Asia's favourite high - triples as it crosses borders into Thailand and Malaysia. Made-in-Myanmar Ice goes for around \$150,000 a kilo by the time it hits Australia's streets. Drugs are trafficked south through Thailand, north into China and west towards Bangladesh - a cascade of stimulants that has overwhelmed regional policing efforts and seeded a crisis of addiction, corruption and money laundering.

A crackdown in the same area last year was met with heavy artillery fire by the rebel groups believed to be running the labs. "This area is very dangerous," an anti-drugs police officer in Kawanghka told AFP, requesting anonymity. "The local people are innocent, but there are some busi-

"It was a homemade explosive device and we are looking for those who helped make it," he said. Local media reported police raids on two working-class neighborhoods in northern Tunis. Anti-terrorism prosecutors have opened an enquiry, spokesman Sofiene Sliti said, but no arrests had yet been made. DNA tests were underway to identify the attackers, he said, adding that a large quantity of explosives was used. "All security units are on high alert," the interior ministry said.

After Friday's blast, police sent reinforcements and forensic experts to the area, where body parts were strewn across the ground. A helicopter buzzed over the Berges du Lac, a district protected round-the-clock by security forces. "It's tough to have to go on working when your colleagues have been wounded," said one police officer at the scene. Office worker Haykel Boukraa spoke of widespread panic. "Our office is 300 meters from (the blast scene), but the explosion was so loud that the windows in our building shook," the 49-year-old told AFP. "There was total panic."

Earlier police had said one of the two assailants had tried to enter the embassy but was prevented by police. But interior ministry spokesman Khaled Ayouni said that "the police patrol was targeted, rather than the embassy". He noted that the attack took place the day before the fourth anniversary of a 2016 attack in the town of Ben Guerane,



**SEVARE, Mali:** Children play in a camp for IDPs on Feb 28, 2020. —AFP

nessmen and ethnic armed groups using the area to produce drugs." The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime says that without tough action against dirty money coupled with better drug rehabilitation programs, the power of organized crime will become unmanageable for some Southeast Asian states. —AFP

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**KAWANGHKA, Myanmar:** Seized drugs, vehicles, laboratory accessories and precursor chemicals are displayed in a football ground to be witnessed by invited military attaches and journalists in Shan state on Friday. —AFP

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**TUNIS:** Police and forensic experts inspect the scene of an explosion near the US embassy in the Tunisian capital on Friday. —AFP

which killed 13 security forces and seven civilians. US ambassador to Tunisia Donald Blome praised authorities for their "immediate protection" of the embassy. A senior State Department official who returned from Tunisia to the US on Thursday said that despite the attack, the country has been increasingly effective in fighting violent extremism. —AFP

## Mexico men confront machismo culture in therapy to combat women violence

**MEXICO CITY:** In an improvised therapy room in a large house in the center of Mexico City, a group of men aged between 20 and 70 close their eyes, inhale and exhale. Each places his hand on his heart and - in a moment of honest reflection - takes time to think about the violence he inflicted on women and the consequences of those actions. "I'm Jaime. This week I committed verbal and emotional violence against my partner. I'm here to help and be helped," said a 63-year-old before a dozen other men replied in unison: "I will help you."

Mexico is suffering from a femicide crisis, with 10 women murdered every day, and increasingly men are questioning the prevalent male chauvinism - or machismo - deeply entrenched in society. "I've never been physically violent with a woman, but yes I've done it in other forms: emotionally, verbally and sexually because several times I was unfaithful," said Jaime, who withheld his surname to protect his family. "I recognize that and I want to change."

Jaime approached Gendes, a gender and development center, a couple of years ago on his partner's advice as they struggled with relationship problems. Founded in 2009, Gendes conducts studies about social inequality and supports activism in a bid to rehabilitate male chauvinists.

### 'Violence, domination and force'

"Masculinity has always been associated with violence, domination and force, but now that's changing. New (perceptions of) masculinity propose the idea of promoting equal treatment of men and women," said psychotherapist and Gendes director Mauro Vargas. He aims to teach the 1,200 men per year who attend his meetings to understand and confront the different types of violence against women: sexual, physical, economic, verbal and cyber.

Mexico has long faced governmental indifference and ineffective policies when it comes to tackling violence against women. Women have begun to take to the streets to demand immediate action to reduce the number of femicides, which grew by 136 percent between 2015 and 2019. Two brutal murders last month, including that of a seven-year-old girl, highlighted the issue ahead of International Women's Day March 8 and ignited protests.

Vargas says daily occurrences such as wolf whistling, sharing photos of naked women or sexist comments about female colleagues perpetuate an inequality that results in violence against women. The therapy at Gendes helps men "unlearn what society has taught them within a macho and misogynistic environment," said Vargas. —AFP



**MEXICO CITY:** Men participate in a therapy to reflect on male chauvinism in Mexico City's neighborhood of La Roma on Feb 25, 2020. —AFP

## Sea of meth as Myanmar army smashes drug labs

**KAWANGHKA:** Sacks of heroin and methamphetamine are laid out in endless rows in a remote Myanmar border zone during a rare raid in the heart of Southeast Asia's infamous 'Golden Triangle'. The seizure in one of the world's biggest narcotics-producing regions put three major laboratories out of business this week and hauled in 43 million meth tablets.

Record amounts of drugs continue to be churned out of the lawless forest areas by rebel groups and shadowy organised crime networks making billions of dollars each year from the trade. Army operations around the Kutkai area of Myanmar's Shan State found the factories producing millions of "yaba" pills - cheap, caffeine-cut meth tablets - as well as heroin and the more addictive crystal meth, known as "Ice".

"Our soldiers are on the ground in areas of the forest the police cannot reach," Major General Tun

## Suicide attackers hit outside US embassy

**TUNIS:** Suicide attackers struck outside the US embassy in the Tunisian capital on Friday, killing a police officer, wounding six other people and once again shaking a city repeatedly hit by jihadist violence. The latest attack came despite a state of emergency imposed in the North African nation in 2015 following a string of bloody assaults claimed by the Islamic State group. The noon explosion rocked the Berges du Lac district hosting the highly fortified embassy, causing panic among pedestrians and motorists. "Two individuals targeted a security patrol... in the street leading to the American embassy," the interior ministry said in a statement.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. Police at the scene said the assailants drove to the area on a motorcycle and detonated their explosive devices as they were approached by officers at a roundabout near the embassy. The two attackers died and one officer, 52-year-old father of three Lieutenant Taoufik Mohammed El Nissaoui, died of his wounds. Five more injured officers and a lightly wounded female civilian were in a stable state, Interior Minister Hichem Mechichi told journalists.

## International

# Migrant crisis at Greek-Turkish border in second week as EU mulls more aid

## Tear gas, water cannon deployed again

**KASTANIES:** The European Union has pleaded with migrants on the Turkish border to stop trying to cross into Greece but dangled the prospect of more aid for Ankara as a standoff between Greek riot police and refugees entered a second week. Tens of thousands of migrants have been trying to get into Greece, an EU member state, since Turkey said on Feb. 28 it would no longer try to keep them on its territory as agreed in 2016 with the EU in return for billions of euros in aid.

Greek and Turkish security forces again deployed tear gas on Friday, witnesses said, sending plumes of smoke above the Kastanies-Pazarkule border crossing. Some migrants dabbed stinging eyes with water. Other trekked through fields probing for chinks in the well-guarded frontier. "The news about the alleged openness (of the Greek-Turkish border) is false and people should not try to move there," the EU's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, told reporters during a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Croatia.

The EU could offer more money beyond the 6 billion euros (\$6.79 billion) pledged in 2016 to help the refugees but Turkey must first stop using them as a "bargaining chip", he said. Turkey, which hosts nearly 4 million Syrian war refugees, says the EU has failed to honor earlier promises. It also wants more European support in Syria, where its troops are facing off against Russian-backed Syrian government forces.

In a sign of the EU's hardening stance since the 2015 migration crisis, when more than a million migrants entered Europe from Turkey, the ministers in Zagreb said they were ready to take "all necessary measures" to stop illegal crossings into Greece, without elaborating. Turkey's foreign ministry slammed the statement, saying it showed EU countries were using migrants as political tools, and that they were allowing international law to be "trampled". It said EU support for Greece showed the bloc was allowing its own values and laws to be disregarded.

"EU countries, including Greece, must abide by their international responsibilities and accept the applications of refugees," the Turkish foreign ministry said in a statement, adding that the comments showed the EU did not understand the burden Turkey had to carry in hosting the migrants. "Accusing a country that hosts the

most number of refugees in the best possible way of using migration for political aims is another indication of the two-faced approach we have been subjected to for years. With this statement, the EU is itself using this issue as a political tool," it said.

### 'At Europe's mercy'

Migrants such as 18-year-old Ahmad Al-Sadeq, from Syria's war-ravaged Idlib province, are unlikely to heed such warnings. "We will stay here for months. We hope that public pressure will grow and force the Greek government to change its mind. The situation requires some heart, not tear gas and fences," said Sadeq, who got into Greece on Thursday but was then sent back. "We left Syria to escape a government that murders women and children ... and now we are here at Europe's mercy." But Fawzi Uzbek, 37, an Afghan national who wants to reach Germany, said he would probably soon head back to Istanbul, where he has been working in a factory for about 18 months. "The Greeks know that if they open the gates they will get many more people (arriving) on this side of the border," said Uzbek, sitting in a makeshift tent he had constructed near the border for himself, his wife and four children. About a quarter of the migrants at the border are Syrian and most of the rest are Afghans, Pakistanis, Iranians and Africans, according to Turkish estimates.

Greece says it has repulsed around 35,000 migrants trying to cross its border in the past week. Turkey has deployed 1,000 special police to the area to halt the pushback of migrants onto its territory. Athens plans to extend its border fence by a further 40 km, sources with knowledge of the matter said. It has also stepped up naval patrols in the Aegean to deter migrants trying to reach Greek islands such as Lesbos by dinghy.

### All at sea

Turkey's coastguard rescued about 120 migrants, including small children, early on Friday. The migrants said the Greek coastguard had disconnected their boats' motors, leaving them adrift in the Aegean. On Lesbos, just a few miles from the Turkish coast, fishermen, hoteliers and shopkeepers expressed concern that more migrant arrivals would further harm their island's



EDIRNE, Turkey: Migrants run away from teargas at the Turkey-Greece border buffer zone near Pazarkule crossing gate yesterday during clashes between Greek police and migrants trying to cross to the Greek side. —AFP

reputation as a dream holiday destination.

"Most businesses, at least tourism businesses, are going to hell," said Vangelis Papastavros, whose wife owns a hotel in Mytilene, the largest town on an island which already houses some 20,000 migrants in camps in mostly squalid conditions. Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan discussed the crisis with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Friday, saying migration regulations between Ankara and the EU were not working and needed to be revised, the Turkish presidency said.

The EU's Borrell said a new ceasefire deal brokered by the presidents of Turkey and Russia for Syria's Idlib province could facilitate increased humanitarian help to

Syria and for the refugees housed in Turkey. He said the EU would host a donor conference on June 29-30. But such news provides scant comfort for the migrants stranded at the Greek-Turkish border.

On Friday night, the occasional pop of teargas permeated by Christian hymns on a loudspeaker from a small chapel on the border, a service common during a period of abstinence observed before Easter in Greece. Sawsan Al-Musawa, who travelled 1,300 km with her four children from a Syrian refugee camp in southeast Turkey to the Greek border, said she had all but given up hope of ever reaching Europe. "We are left to the dogs," she said. —Reuters

## Haiti's vicious cycle of humanitarian, political crises

**PORT-AU-PRINCE:** Haiti finally has a new government, but without a parliament capable of giving it legitimacy and without electoral prospects, the country remains paralyzed by a political crisis with potentially devastating social, economic and security consequences. It's been more than a year since the Caribbean nation has been led by an interim government. Joseph Jouteh, nominated Monday, is the fifth prime minister chosen by embattled President Jovenel Moise since the latter came to power in February 2017.

But neither Jouteh's general policy nor his cabinet, which was announced Wednesday, can get the approval of deputies and senators: since no legislative elections were held in the fall, Haiti's parliament has been inoperative since January. "Haiti has neither an electoral law nor an electoral budget. President Moise could pass an electoral law and budget by decree, but popular protests and dissent make clear this would not be seen as legitimate," Ellie Happel, a lawyer and the Haiti program director for Global Justice Clinic, testified Wednesday to the US Congress's Commission on Human Rights.

Moise - who took office after an election process that lasted nearly two years and in which barely 20 percent of the electorate participated - was relatively unknown to the public until he announced his presidential bid. Criticized from the get-go by his main opponents, the Haitian leader has quickly attracted public anger, as demonstrations demanding his resignation have proliferated across the island.

### Corruption and poverty

In a nation where more than 60 percent of the population lives under the poverty line (less than \$2.41 per day, according to the World Bank), protests against Moise increased in May 2019 when the High Court of Accounts announced he was suspected of involvement in a huge corruption scandal that stretches back a decade.

This came amid security troubles in the country, with violence and unrest spreading beyond the shantytowns of the capital, which have been controlled by armed gangs for years. In the fall of 2019, repeated protests and barricades erected on the country's main roads blocked almost all activities, prompting a majority of schools to shut down for more than two months. Moise told his cabinet that restoring security, by guaranteeing free movement for people and goods throughout the country, was a priority. But the government's ability to intervene appears slim. "A new government in such a complex context, without adequate budgetary resources, without a peaceful climate, without a real national dialogue, without a real desire to separate from corrupt practices will not work miracles," said Haitian economist Etzer Emile.

### Low investment

In addition to the political impasse, Haiti has seen a surge in kidnappings for ransom in recent weeks that is a major blow to hopes for economic recovery. "Misery is increasing. Investments, domestic and foreign, have never been as weak as they have in the past few years," said Emile. —AFP

## Guinea 'opposition wounded' turn to clandestine clinic

**CONAKRY:** In a dingy room reeking of blood and sweat in Guinea's capital Conakry, a volunteer doctor treats a man with bullet wounds in his legs as he tries to suppress his groans. Hidden inside a gated compound a stone's throw from the city centre, supporters of the West African state's beleaguered political opposition treat men and boys they say were injured during raids by security forces.

Guinea has been rocked by huge protests since mid-October over fears that President Alpha Conde is seeking to use a referendum for a new constitution to stay in power. Protests have often turned violent, drawing rebukes for security forces from human rights groups over their use of force and alleged abuses. At least 31 people have died in the unrest to date, according to an AFP tally, including one gendarme.

Underscoring Guinea's political polarization, many of

## Viruses: Ancient, tiny and amazing

**PARIS:** They're as old as life itself but scientists can't say for sure if they're alive. They're written into our DNA, shaping the human saga through mutation and resilience. We touch hundreds of millions of them every day. As the novel coronavirus outbreak disrupts global markets and prompts unprecedented containment measures, it is worth asking a very basic question: what, precisely, is a virus? What are they made of? Where did they come from? And, perhaps most importantly, why are they trying to kill us?

### Unimaginable numbers

The story of viruses is perhaps best told through mind-bending figures. According to Curtis Suttle, a virologist at the University of British Columbia, the physical properties of viruses make them hard for us to comprehend. Their tiny size, for starters. If each virus in a human body grew to the size of a pin-head, the average adult would become 150 kilometers tall. In a 2018 study, Suttle found more than 800 million viruses settle on each square meter of Earth every single day.

In a tablespoon of seawater there are typically more viruses than there are people in Europe. "Most of us will swallow more than a billion viruses every time we go swimming," said Suttle. "We are inundated by viruses." A 2011 paper published in Nature Microbiology estimated that there are 10<sup>10</sup> to the power 31 (more than one quintillion, or 1 followed by 31 zeros) viruses on Earth. Lay them all end to end and they'd stretch 100 million light years, or 1,000 times the breadth of the Milky Way.

### The virus as concept

Viruses are best thought of as "molecular packages", accord-

## Women account for quarter of world MPs, but progress slowing

**GENEVA:** A quarter of all lawmakers serving in national parliaments worldwide are women, the International Parliamentary Union said Friday, warning though that progress towards gender parity was slowing amid significant "pushback". In 2019, women accounted for 24.9 percent of parliamentarians worldwide, the IPU, which

the deaths are thought to have occurred in Conakry opposition strongholds, where residents complain of routine harassment from security forces. "Some of the wounded are afraid to go to the hospitals," said a doctor working in the makeshift clinic, whom AFP is not naming for security reasons. Residents of the wrong neighborhoods fear they will be turned away from hospitals, or that security forces will pursue them there.

So many of the injured attend the hidden clinic run by the FNDC, an alliance of opposition civil-society groups which rejects the new constitution. The clinic itself is rudimentary, consisting of one small, hot room run by volunteer medics. It treats about 50 people after every protest, leading FNDC member Ibrahim Diallo said. Outside the room, about a dozen mostly teenagers — wearing bandages and splints, some barely able to talk — sit on upholstered chairs on a shaded terrace.

AFP spoke to 12 men and boys receiving treatment at the clinic last week. All said they came from known opposition districts in Conakry and that they were targeted despite not taking part in protests. The interviews took place on March 1, two days after Conde postponed a referendum on his reforms after domestic and international criticism about the fairness of the vote. Following the post-

ing to Teri Shors, professor of biology at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and author of several books on the subject. "These packages have to be small enough to fit inside of a cell to cause infection," she told AFP. Essentially strings of genetic material contained by a few protein molecules, viruses occupy a strange middle ground between the living and the inert. Since they don't have cells and do not produce energy through respiration - a key definition of living organisms - many scientists don't consider them to be alive. Yet, as soon as they enter their host, viruses spring into activity in ways rarely seen in nature, hacking cells with new genetic instructions to replicate at dizzying speed.

Ed Rybicki, a virologist at the University of Cape Town, said viruses were "as much a concept as a thing". "I consider viruses to be alive, because when they are in a cell, they ARE the cell," he said. Shors said that viruses were "metabolically inactive". "Unless they can enter a warm body and get inside of a cell, viruses are inert," she said. But once it infects its host, "the entire cellular machinery is entirely devoted to making viral progeny", said Suttle. "This is the living virus."

### Origins

While their beginnings are uncertain, viruses have left their imprint on nearly all life on Earth, including humans. Around eight percent of the human genome is of viral origin - that is, the remnants of ancient viruses that have infected us, developing species-wide tolerance. But their story begins aeons before humans. "We think that viruses were there at the very beginning," said Suttle. "Whatever primordial soup gave rise to cellular life, likely gave rise to viral 'life' at the same time."

### Are all viruses bad?

Most viruses come to our attention because they make us sick. Recent years have seen widespread outbreaks of viral infectious diseases, from the coronavirus epidemic today to SARS in the early 2000s and Ebola in western and central Africa.

was founded in 1889 and is one of the world's oldest international organizations, said in a fresh report.

"There has been considerable progress" in recent years, IPU Secretary-General Martin Chungong told reporters in Geneva, pointing out that the percentage back in 1995 stood at just 11.3 percent. "There has been a shift in the way people think," he said, pointing out that a quarter century ago the ambition was to get women to the 30-percent mark, while today "the idea of having 50-50 in parliament is the norm."

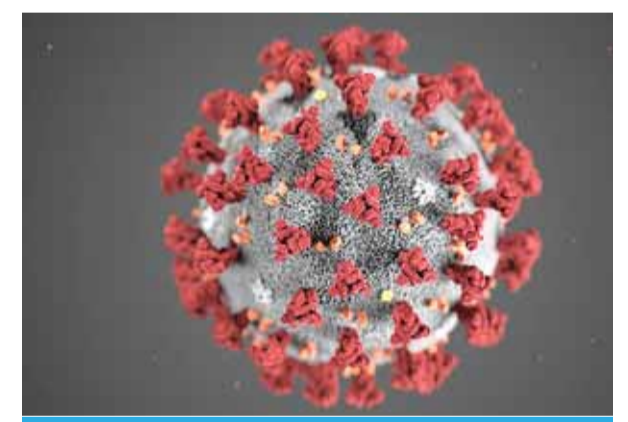
Four countries have reached full gender parity: Rwanda, Cuba, Bolivia and the United Arab Emirates. Today, the Americas has the best gender balance in parliament, counting 31.3 percent women MPs across



CONAKRY: A man recovers from a gunshot wound to the hand inside a hidden makeshift hospital on March 1, 2020. —AFP

ponement, on February 29, protests broke out in opposition districts along one of the city's main thoroughfares, where from sidestreets, youths hurled rocks at riot-gear-clad security forces.

It is unclear when the constitutional referendum will be held, although Conde has promised it will take place within two weeks of the original date of March 1. —AFP



This file handout illustration image obtained Feb 3, 2020 reveals ultrastructural morphology exhibited by the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. —AFP

But there are virtuous viruses too. "Nearly all viruses are in fact harmless to humans," said Rybicki. Indeed, many viruses benefit human health, infecting other organisms that would otherwise do us harm. Another benefit: the carbon uptake of ocean algae, which helps purify the air we breathe, is greatly accelerated by viruses. And they have widespread healthcare applications.

Besides vaccines derived from weakened viruses, an emerging area of treatment known as virology is developing new ways to treat chronic diseases such as cancer. "These viruses replicate in cancer cells but not healthy cells, so this treatment is not as toxic as classic cancer therapies," said Shors. For Rybicki, who has spent most of his professional life trying to unlock their secrets, the most remarkable thing about viruses is how many more mysteries they still hold. "They are the most diverse organisms on our planet, and there are more of them than anything else - and we still know hardly anything about them." —AFP

the region, ahead of Europe which counts just under 30 percent. The Pacific has the worst record on female representation in parliament, with only 19.4 percent, and three countries in this region - Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu - have no women members of parliament at all.

Chungong warned that worldwide there was now clearly "a slowdown in the growth of women's parliamentary participation." Last year, women's global representation in parliament grew by only 0.6 percent, after an already modest increase of 0.9 percent a year earlier. "There seems to be pushback when it comes to women's political participation, and it is important that we push back against pushback," he said. —AFP



## International

# 'China is not immigrant country': A draft law sparks online racism

## Foreigners may gain permanent residency

**BEIJING:** A new draft law that could make it easier for foreigners to gain permanent residency in China has stirred up a torrent of xenophobia online. The proposal, released by the justice ministry last week, has been gathering billions of views and a flood of angry posts on social media, targeting Africans in particular. "China's forty years of family planning policy does not make it a place for foreign trash to soar," wrote one user on the Twitter-like platform Weibo, referring to the one-child birth limit China imposed between 1980 and 2016.

The person went on to use racist language against black people, saying: "Our common Chinese ancestry

will not be tainted by Africans." Some Weibo-users posted videos of black people apparently committing crimes in China, while a campaign to encourage Chinese women to date Chinese men, under the hashtag "China girl", had 240 million views as of Thursday afternoon. Another widely-shared post on Weibo read: "China is not an immigrant country." A hashtag related to the law has gained more than 4.8 billion views.

The law — open to suggestions from the public until March 27 — proposes allowing foreigners' dependants to apply simultaneously for permanent residency, as well as relaxing education and salary requirements. State media said less than one percent of foreigners in

China have permanent residency. The draft bill comes at a time when China is seeking to expand its global influence and attract foreign exchange and investment. Its massive Belt and Road infrastructure investment project has funded thousands of lucrative scholarships for students from developing countries.

But there have been points of tension, including a crackdown on illegal immigrants in commercial hub Guangzhou's "Little Africa" which left many complaining of hard treatment from authorities. There are also long-standing anxieties about perceived preferential treatment for foreigners in China, especially international students. "For a long time, some foreigners in China have

secretly received 'superior treatment' as citizens," wrote Hu Xijin, editor of the nationalistic Global Times. Last July, Shandong University apologized after a backlash over a policy that introduced foreign students to local students of the opposite sex. Heather Li, a China-Africa business consultant, said she was "really shocked" by the extent of the online racism. She used to tell her African friends that many Chinese people were friendly and curious about their culture, despite their occasional encounters with prejudice. "But after seeing it on Weibo, I realized there was so much more to it, because people were using very strong language and really disrespecting people from other races," she said. —AFP

## Dozens killed as gunmen attack Afghan rally

**KABUL:** Dozens of people were killed when gunmen opened fire at a political rally in Kabul on Friday, the deadliest assault in Afghanistan since the US signed a withdrawal deal with the Taliban. The attack, claimed by the Islamic State group, highlights a glaring lack of security in the Afghan capital just 14 months ahead of the scheduled withdrawal of all foreign forces.

It also calls into question a key element of the US-Taliban deal signed February 29 — whether the Taliban can stop jihadists such as IS from running amok in Afghanistan after US forces pull out. In a statement, IS said two brothers had targeted a "gathering of apostates" with machine guns and grenades. The gunmen inflicted devastating carnage at the crowded event in west Kabul, killing 32 people and wounding 58 others, health ministry spokesman Wahidullah Mayar said.

Interior ministry spokesman Nasrat Rahimi put the toll at 29 dead, with an additional 61 wounded. He said special forces units eventually killed the two gunmen. The assault occurred at a commemoration ceremony for Abdul Ali

Mazari — a politician from the Hazara ethnic group, most of whom are Shiite Muslims. The Sunni-extremist IS had claimed an attack on the same ceremony last year, when a barrage of mortar fire killed at least 11 people. Rahimi said gunfire had erupted from a construction site near the event.

Several top political officials were at the ceremony, including Afghanistan's chief executive Abdullah Abdullah. The interior ministry later confirmed that all the high-ranking officials had been "safely evacuated." "We left the ceremony following the gunfire, and a number of people were wounded, but I do not have any reports of martyred people for now," Hazara leader Mohammad Mohaqiq told Tolo News. President Ashraf Ghani condemned the massacre as a "crime against humanity".

### Taliban violence down

The attack came less than a week after the US and Taliban signed a deal that would result in the complete withdrawal of foreign troops in 14 months. The withdrawal however depends heavily on the Taliban being able to control jihadist forces such as Al-Qaeda and IS. If such groups remain, so too does the US military.

A US Forces-Afghanistan spokesman said the response to the attack was "Afghan led," but US personnel gave medical aid to the victims. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insisted that



**KABUL:** Men stand next to a pile of clothes and footwear of victims yesterday, a day after a gun attack at a political rally. —AFP

despite the attack, violence in Afghanistan was "significantly down." "The violence levels, they're still lower than they have been in the last five or six years," Pompeo told CNBC television. "We see the path forward towards a peace and reconciliation opportunity."

He later condemned the "despicable" attack, saying in a statement that the peace process "presents a critical opportunity for Afghans to come together to build a united front against the

menace of ISIS."

But since the deal was signed in Doha fighting has continued across Afghanistan, raising questions over whether the agreement would reduce violence and lead to talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Afghan government officials and the Taliban are supposed to meet in Oslo next week, but talks are likely to be delayed over disagreement about a prisoner release. —AFP

## Denied in life, India's lower-caste Dalits fight for land in death

**NEW DELHI:** India's lower-caste Dalits are increasingly asserting their claims over land so they can bury their dead, human rights activists said on Friday, as their traditional burial grounds are targeted by real estate developers and higher-caste Hindus. Last year, a viral video of Dalit men lowering a dead body by a rope from a bridge after an upper-caste community in the southern state of Tamil Nadu refused to allow the funeral procession to pass through their land, sparked a public uproar.

In other states, Dalits sometimes have to keep their deceased relatives for several days until they can resolve where to bury or cremate them, said Lalit Babar, general secretary of the National Federation of Dalit Land Rights, an advocacy group. "We do not have land for housing or for livelihoods. Now, we are being denied land for dying," he said. "We have launched campaigns in several states to demand that our traditional burial grounds be returned, or new land be allotted," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at the sidelines of a land conference in Delhi.

India banned caste-based discrimination in 1955, but

centuries-old biases against lower-caste groups, including Dalits persist, making it harder for them to access education, jobs and homes. More than half the country's lower-caste population is landless, census data showed. While several states have laws aimed at giving land to Dalits, few have done so, according to Dalit activists and leaders.

Meanwhile, a growing population and rising pressure on land to build homes, highways, airports and industry is triggering conflicts, with farmers and lower-caste citizens most affected. In rural areas where caste biases are most entrenched, Dalits have lost their burial ground to village elites, Babar said. "Even where we do have land, there are no facilities like water and electricity. Or we are not allowed to pass through the village with the body to go to the burial ground," he said.

After a recent campaign by Dalit rights groups, authorities in the western state of Maharashtra have allocated small plots of land for cremation in villages with Dalit populations, he said. A broader national campaign by Dalit activists has long demanded for 5 acres of land for each Dalit family — enough for a home and small farm to live off. Government officials in Tamil Nadu, in response to a court hearing after the viral video, said there was no discrimination against Dalits.

But there is a long-standing battle in the state over so-called panchami land, which was allocated to Dalits during the British colonial era. Of an estimated 1.2 million



**KASBA BONLI, India:** People belonging to the Dalit community take part in a nationwide strike called by several Dalit organizations in Rajasthan in this April 2, 2018 file photo. —Reuters

acres of land allotted, less than 10% is in the hands of Dalits, according to human rights groups. Without land of their own, Dalits are forced to cremate their dead along riverbanks or on public land, said Richard Devadoss, a convener for the South India Coalition for Land Rights, an advocacy group. "Without land, they have no power, no dignity, even in death," he said. —Reuters

## Pakistan's 'biggest feminist' under fire after sexist tirade

**LAHORE:** He calls himself "Pakistan's biggest feminist", but soap-opera writer Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar sparked a national row this week after he hurled abuse at a women's rights activist on live television. The invective-laden diatribe came just days before thousands of people are expected to march in cities across Pakistan to mark International Women's Day, adding fuel to growing calls for greater freedoms in the ultra-conservative nation where pushback against such demands can sometimes be vicious.

Qamar's tirade targeting activist Marvi Sirmed quickly went viral, highlighting Pakistan's acrimonious conversation around women's rights and cultural values. While appearing on a television panel to discuss the upcoming Aurat (women's) march, Qamar took aim at its slogan, "My body, my choice". He told Sirmed that "no one would even spit on your body" — adding she was a "cheap woman" who should "shut up".

Reaction was swift, with local media giant Geo Entertainment—which recently signed Qamar to write soap operas—sus-

pending his contract, while politicians and celebrities condemned him on social media. Drama critic Sadaf Haider told AFP that Qamar held "deeply misogynistic" views that he wove into his soaps, arguing that such narratives are "not helping the cause of women's rights" in Pakistan.

Qamar declined repeated requests for comment, though he has appeared on other talk shows and refused to apologize, blaming Sirmed for interrupting him on air. Pakistani soaps have been criticised for their depiction of female protagonists—often damsels in distress silently accepting abuse from their in-laws and husbands, and that is shown as a strength.

Female villains are usually the opposite: they do not want to settle down, do not want to conform and end up creating problems by seducing the virtuous heroine's husband. While Qamar has come under fire for the negative portrayal of women in his soap operas, his latest work, "Meray Paas Tum Ho" ("I have you") broke viewership records in Pakistan.

### Whose body?

The "my body, my choice" slogan during last year's event generated criticism in a Muslim country largely unaffected by the global #MeToo movement. Organizers and participants were accused of promoting Western, liberal values and disrespecting religious and

cultural sensitivities.

Some of the more provocative posters and slogans from the march discussing divorce, sexual harassment and menstruation drew a quick backlash and a slew of threats against the organizers. Last month, anti-march campaigners filed a petition in Lahore to block this year's event, which is set for Sunday. Lawyer Azhar Siddique alleged it is being funded by "various anti-state parties" with the aim of sowing "anarchy" in society. The judge ruled that a ban would be unconstitutional, but warned marchers to refrain from spreading "hate speech and immorality".

A separate petition in Islamabad calling for a ban on the march was also dismissed Friday. Nighat Dad, part of the Aurat march organizing committee, was unfazed by the backlash to previous events. "In reality, men like Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar are threatened, which is why they are coming up with all kinds of ridiculous arguments against the women's movement," she said. Women have long fought for basic rights in Pakistan, where activists often face harassment and threats for the work they do.

Sirmed, the activist, is known to have received multiple death threats. In 2012, she escaped unharmed when unknown assailants fired upon her car. Her home was ransacked in 2018 and her laptops,



**ISLAMABAD:** In this picture taken on March 5, 2020 a man watches a video clip on his mobile phone of a local TV channel about a debate between women's rights activist Marvi Sirmed (right) and television playwright Khalil ur Rehman (second left). —AFP

passport and other travel documents were taken. Amnesty International expressed support for the Aurat march, saying in a statement that the "horrific threats of violence, intimidation and harassment of the marchers must stop".

Much of Pakistani society operates under a strict code of "honor", systemizing the oppression of women in matters such as the right to choose who to

marry, reproductive rights and even the right to an education. According to estimates by the Honor Based Violence Awareness Network, at least 1,000 women fall victim to honor killings in Pakistan each year. Pakistan ranked a dismal 136 on the UN Development Program's Gender Inequality Index in 2018, doing worse than most of its South Asian neighbors. —AFP

## India makes u-turn on TV ban over New Delhi riot coverage

**NEW DELHI:** The Indian government backtracked yesterday after slapping a 48-hour ban on two TV channels for what officials called biased coverage of New Delhi riots. A blackout of Asian News and MediaOne was ordered on Friday but lifted after an outcry from opposition groups and protests by the channels to the information and broadcasting ministry. Information minister Prakash Javadekar said Prime Minister Narendra Modi requested the ban be revoked on learning of it. "Our basic belief is that press freedom is essential in a democratic set-up," Javadekar told reporters when asked about the move.

A government order had accused the channels of covering last month's deadly riots in the capital "in a manner that highlighted the attack on places of worship and siding towards a particular community". At least 50 people were killed in Delhi's worst sectarian violence in decades, over two-thirds of them from India's Muslim minority, according to hospital lists. Mosques were burnt and vandalized along with Hindu-owned shops and at least 15 Hindus were killed.

### 'Undemocratic'

MediaOne called the ban "a blatant attack on free and fair reporting" and an "unprecedented and undemocratic action". It also said it was penalized for criticizing Delhi police and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu nationalist group close to Modi's ruling right-wing party. Indian governments have long been sensitive to media coverage and criticism, analysts say. In 2016, officials banned NDTV's Hindi-language channel for 24 hours for broadcasting details of an attack by militants on an air force base.

The government also banned Qatar-based channel Al Jazeera for five days in 2015 for displaying a map of the disputed Kashmir region deemed incorrect. Last year a journalist was jailed over derogatory comments made on social media against a chief minister from Modi's party. The latest ban sparked an outcry from opposition parties. "All democratic minds should unite to voice against this fascist decision," Ramesh Chennithala, a senior member of the Congress party, said on Facebook. —AFP



SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2020

## Business

**12** Oil takes biggest daily dive in over a decade as Russia and OPEC split**13** Burgan Bank Group announces solid full year 2019 performance**14** NBK approves distribution of 35% cash dividends, 5% bonus shares

**BAABDAT:** Lebanon's President Michel Aoun (center) heads a ministerial council at the presidential palace in Baabdat, east of the capital Beirut yesterday. The government formed in January inherited a disastrous economic situation and faces an impossible balancing act between the traditional powerbrokers who voted it in and a street that wants all of its ruling elite out. Lebanon must decide whether to repay \$1.2 billion in Eurobonds due tomorrow. —AFP

# Lebanon suspends banks' asset freeze

## Central bank moves to stem spiraling unofficial exchange rate

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon's attorney general has suspended an order freezing the assets of 20 banks and their directors over concerns about its impact on the country's fragile economy, state-run media said. The order was postponed to allow for the "study of its impact on the national currency, banking transactions as well as on the money of savers and economic security", Ghassan Oueidat said Thursday according to a statement carried by the National News Agency. "Such a measure would likely drag the country and its financial sector into chaos."

Lebanon has been gripped by mass protests against the political class and banking sector even as it suffers its worst economic crisis in decades. Banks have imposed increasingly tight limits on dollar withdrawals and transfers abroad as part of measures to tackle a severe liquidity crisis. But bankers stand accused of having sent millions of dollars abroad despite those limitations. On Monday the prosecutor separately called in 15 banks over more than 2 billion dollars in capital flight despite the restrictions in the two months after the start of the protests.

The value of the Lebanese pound has plummeted on the black market, prices have risen, and many businesses have been forced to slash salaries, dismiss staff or close. Lebanon is one of the most indebted countries in

the world, with a public debt equivalent to 150 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP). The country is now under pressure to pay a \$1.2-billion Eurobond maturing on March 9, with a decision expected on whether or not to default.

### Unofficial exchange rate

Meanwhile, Lebanon's central bank is seeking to rein in exchange rates and enforce a cap on the local currency in the parallel market to contain its unofficial devaluation. Central bank chief Riad Salameh asked "all exchange offices, under pain of legal or administrative sanctions, to commit exceptionally to a maximum buying price for foreign currency in Lebanese pounds of no more than 30 percent above the exchange rate set by the central bank to deal with lenders".

The official exchange rate has stood at 1,507 Lebanese pounds to the dollar for decades, but the value of the local currency has plummeted to more than 2,600 on the black market. Money changers in protest-hit Lebanon had agreed in January to cap the dollar exchange at 2,000 pounds, but the move has failed to stem spiraling rates. Friday's central bank order, which reinforces the January agreement, is to apply for the next six months, according to the statement carried by

state-run National News Agency.

Debt-ridden Lebanon is facing its most serious economic crisis since the end of its 1975-1990 civil war. Banks have increasingly limited dollar withdrawals and transfers abroad to stem a severe liquidity crisis, even as the tanking economy has caused businesses to slash salaries, fire staff, or close. The country has been rocked by unprecedented, nationwide protests in recent months, led by young people who blame government corruption and incompetence for the lack of jobs and basic services.

### Sovereign debt

Lebanon's top leadership opposes repaying the country's sovereign debt, the presidency said yesterday, indicating the heavily indebted state is heading towards a default as it grapples with a major financial crisis. A default on Lebanon's foreign currency debt will mark a new phase in the crisis that has hammered Lebanon's economy since October, slicing around 40% off the value of the local currency and leading banks to deny savers full access to deposits.

Lebanon has a \$1.2 billion Eurobond due on March 9, part of a wider portfolio of some \$31 billion in dollar bonds that sources told Reuters on Friday the government would seek to restructure in negotiations with its

creditors. Prime Minister Hassan Diab will address the Eurobond issue and Lebanon's wider economic crisis in a speech to the nation at 6:30 pm. The announcement from the presidency followed a meeting attended by the president, prime minister, parliament speaker, central bank governor and head of the country's banking association.

"The attendees decided unanimously to stand by the government in any choice it makes in terms of managing the debt, except paying the debt maturities," the presidency said in a statement after the meeting. Sources said Lebanon was set to announce that it cannot make upcoming dollar bond payments and wants to restructure \$31 billion of foreign currency debt unless a last-minute deal with creditors could be found to avoid a disorderly default.

Lebanon hired US investment bank Lazard and law firm Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP last week as advisers on the widely expected restructuring. The financial crisis came to a head last year as capital inflows slowed and protests erupted over state corruption and bad governance. The import-dependent economy has shed jobs and inflation has risen as the pound has slumped, adding to grievances that have fuelled protests. —Agencies

## Burgan Bank extends dining loyalty program

**KUWAIT:** Burgan Bank announced adding three of Kuwait's trendiest and most popular outlets to its dining loyalty program. The newly added places are "Gia", "The Backburner", and "Eggsit". Burgan Bank ensures its customers receive a taste of unique concepts by continuously evolving its offerings through new collaborations.

Using any of Burgan Bank's cards, customers can now enjoy 15% discount from the three recent additions to its list

of restaurants. A Kuwait-born concept, GIA provides a rich, refreshing and colorful cuisine, capturing the essence of Mediterranean food. Customers can visit any of the GIA's three branches located in Salmiya, Kuwait City or Al Hamra Shopping Center to enjoy the discount.

Located in Khaleejiya Complex, The Backburner is a specialty coffee shop, serving artisanal coffee and sweet bites while Eggsit, situated in Crystal Tower, is a chef-driven, gourmet food concept. Inspired by a true love for eggs, the menu offers fresh and quality products cooked to order with its key ingredient, eggs. To know more about Burgan Bank's latest offers, or any of its products and services, customers can visit any of the Burgan Bank's branches or Burgan Banks Instagram page on @BurganBankKuwait.

## Markets extend slump as virus crisis deepens

**NEW YORK:** Global stocks tumbled and oil prices collapsed Friday as investors panicked over the expected damage of the coronavirus to global economic growth. Haven investments gold and the yen surged as the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that the epidemic must be taken seriously. At the close of trade, the Paris stock market was down by 4.1 percent, Frankfurt dived 3.4 percent, London shed 3.5 percent and Milan tumbled 3.7 percent in a fierce global markets sell-off that began about two weeks ago.

Wall Street stocks also suffered another bruising session, with petroleum producers and banks especially hard-hit, as the S&P 500 ended down 1.7 percent. Oil, already slumping on virus-linked demand fears, extended losses to around 10 percent as Russia said it had failed to reach an agreement on possible cuts in output at a meeting with OPEC.

"Stocks are on the back foot once again, with markets tumbling amid continued growth in the coronavirus crisis," said analyst Joshua Mahony at IG trading group. "The stimulus-led rebound in global stocks has been short-lived, with fears over an escalation of the coronavirus crisis providing yet another bout of selling across European markets." —AFP

## Lufthansa to halve flight capacity over coronavirus

**FRANKFURT AM MAIN:** German airline giant Lufthansa said it would slash capacity by half in the coming weeks, as the group battles "drastic declines in bookings and numerous flight cancellations" prompted by the novel coronavirus. "Based on further demand development, capacity will be reduced by up to 50 percent in the coming weeks," Lufthansa said in a statement, after earlier announcing it would cut one in four flights.

The carrier's shares closed slightly lower in Frankfurt, shedding 0.2 percent to trade at 11.48 euros (\$13), but still outperforming the overall blue-chip DAX index, which was down 3.4 percent. Lufthansa with subsidiaries like Eurowings, Swiss and Austrian Airlines has announced deep cuts in its timetable this week as the effect of the COVID-19 disease began to bite.

It will not fly routes to China and Iran until late April, while Israeli restrictions on non-resident arrivals from some EU countries prompted it to scrap flights to the Jewish state until March 28.

Capacity equivalent to 150 planes was already grounded, 25 of them from the long-haul fleet. On Thursday, Lufthansa said its previously-announced 25-percent capacity cut would mean 7,100 flight cancellations around Europe through to the end of its winter timetable on March 28.

Many of the cancellations will fall on high-frequency German domestic services to cities like Berlin and Hamburg from the group's Frankfurt and Munich hubs. The group is also looking into temporarily taking "the entire Airbus A380 fleet" out of service in Frankfurt and Munich, amounting to 14 aircraft. Meanwhile, "a second focus of the route cancellations" was Italy, with cities including Milan, Venice and Rome affected, and other countries around Europe also hit.

The Lufthansa group said it had instituted a hiring freeze, offered unpaid leave and is considering slashing workers' hours "to avoid dismissals". The group is due release its 2019 results on March 19 and will likely face questions over the expected financial impact of the epidemic at the annual earnings news conference. Lufthansa however cautioned that it was "not yet possible to estimate the burden on earnings" from the virus fallout. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) recently warned the total revenue impact on the industry could be in the range of \$63-\$100 billion. —AFP

### New Restaurants added to our dining list



In London, NY, banks send staff home and to other locations; virus spreads

Lenders cancel travel, split up trading teams

LONDON: More than 50 staff at Societe Generale's London office were working from home on Friday...

The number of people infected with the coronavirus

across the world surpassed 100,000 on Friday. The outbreak has killed more than 3,400 people and spread across more than 90 nations...

non-essential travel and has conducted a deep clean of all branches. Chief Executive Colin Hunt said in a radio interview.

Don't panic
The mood among financial firms was more practical than panicked. "Had a few hedge funds that went into full shutdown on Monday because of coronavirus but then realized they were over-reacting and went back into the office later in the week..."

Oil takes biggest daily dive in over a decade as Russia, OPEC split

NEW YORK: Brent slid to its biggest daily loss in more than 11 years on Friday after Russia balked at OPEC's proposed steep production cuts...

Brent futures had their biggest daily percentage fall since December 2008, down \$4.72, or 9.4%, to settle at \$45.27 a barrel.

The number of people infected with coronavirus across the world surpassed 100,000 as the outbreak reached more countries and the economic damage intensified.

Non-OPEC states were expected to contribute 500,000 bpd to the overall extra cut, OPEC ministers said. The new deal would have meant OPEC+ production curbs amounting to a total of 3.6 million bpd, or about 3.6% of global supply.

stc launches postpaid plans for Samsung Galaxy S20 series

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company- stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait...

The Samsung Galaxy S20 series includes a total of three new devices: Samsung Galaxy S20 (4G), Samsung Galaxy S20+ (5G) and the Samsung Galaxy S20+ Ultra (5G).

stc offers a variety of bundled data and minute packages through postpaid plans that are specially designed to meet the needs and requirements of the company's diverse customer base.

Solid US economy bracing for coronavirus infection

WASHINGTON: Hiring is surging and wages are rising in the United States as the year begins, but the coronavirus is poised to infect the economy...

But private economists warn the positive data presents an outdated picture, and more real-time gauges of economic activity already show the spreading alarm.

And workers in many of those businesses do not have

pletely change the way we communicate and experience the world online. At stc, we are committed towards our mission to enable the digital transformation in Kuwait.

We believe that the mass deployment and adoption of the 5G technology in Kuwait will be a key steppingstone in our goal towards enabling digital transformation in the nation.

A massive leap forward
Samsung's Galaxy S20 series introduces 3 new devices: S20, S20+ 5G and the S20+ Ultra 5G.

paid sick leave, meaning they may go to work while infected with the virus or lose money they would otherwise spend if they take time off.

Trump on Friday once again demanded the Federal Reserve lower borrowing rates to stimulate the economy, even though the central bank announced an emergency rate cut on Tuesday.

The US economy produced another blockbuster hiring spree in February, adding 273,000 new jobs, and the January figure was revised up to show the same increase.



experience of everything customers love to do with their phones, easier and better-enjoy personalized music for every moment of the day, watch videos the way they are meant to be seen and play console-style games on the go.

far outpacing the 178,000 monthly pace in 2019. But that was before the major shutdowns caused by the outbreak that began in China before spreading to numerous countries.

"Overall, these are great numbers, but unfortunately this is news from another planet," Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics said in an analysis.

Temporary and short-lived
White House economic advisor Larry Kudlow acknowledged there would be some effects on the economy but urged calm.

EXCHANGE RATES

Table with columns for currency and rate. Includes sections for Al-Muzaini Exchange Co., ASIAN COUNTRIES, GCC COUNTRIES, ARAB COUNTRIES, and EUROPEAN & AMERICAN COUNTRIES.

Table with columns for currency and rate. Includes sections for Euro, Sterling Pound, Canadian dollar, Turkish lira, Swiss Franc, and Dollarco Exchange Co. Ltd.

Table with columns for CURRENCY, BUY, and SELL. Includes sections for THAI BHAT, BAHRAIN EXCHANGE COMPANY WLL, Europe, Australasia, America, and Asia.

Table with columns for currency and rate. Includes sections for Hong Kong Dollar, Arab, and others.

# Burgan Bank Group announces solid Full Year 2019 performance

Burgan's net income grew to KD 84.7 million



Majed Essa Al-Ajeel, Chairman of Burgan Bank Group.



Masaud Hayat, Vice chairman and Group Chief Executive Officer of Burgan Bank.



Raed Al-Haqhaq, Burgan Bank Deputy Group CEO and CEO-Kuwait.



KUWAIT: Burgan Bank KPSC (Burgan or Group) announced its Full Year 2019 financial results yesterday. Burgan's FY'19 Net Income grew to KD 84.7mn (up 3% y-o-y), thereby generating shareholders returns of 10%. The strong numbers reflect focus on generating high quality earnings, achieving operating efficiencies, improving asset quality with clear goal of maximizing shareholders returns. Given this solid performance, Burgan Board of Directors has proposed cash dividend of 12 fils per share, subject to shareholders approval at Annual General Meeting.

For FY'19, the Group reported total Revenues of KD 248.2mn due to its ability to maintain stable Net Interest margins (NIMs) of 2.7% and generate strong levels of non-interest income (at 33% of revenues in FY'19 as compared to 31% in FY'18). During FY'19, Burgan's Cost to Income ratio improved by 90bps driven by lower operating costs. Burgan's asset quality further improved with NPL ratio of 2.5% in FY'19 (20bps reduction y-o-y), while its Coverage Ratio further strengthened to 200% (as compared to 168% in FY'18). The credit costs for the year also improved to 110bps (as compared to 140bps in FY'18).

In FY'19, Burgan grew its loan book by 1%, reflecting a cautious growth approach in the subsidiaries market while focusing on its core market (Kuwait) where the loan book grew by 8%. In FY'19 Burgan's customer deposits grew by 6% adding further diversification in its funding base. In FY'19, Burgan reported Common Equity Tier 1 ratio (CET1) of 11.5% and Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 16.8% indicating sufficient capital buffers for the business. Commenting on these results Majed Essa Al Ajeel, Chairman of Burgan Bank Group KPSC said: "Burgan's solid set of FY'19 results yet again proves the strength of our operating capabilities and prudent risk management."

This approach helps us generate consistent shareholders returns while maintaining sound risk appetite "During 2019, one of the Group's major achievements was the successful issuance of USD 500mn Tier1 capital securities. The issuance was very well received by the global investor community and the strong subscription levels and attractive pricing demonstrated strong investor confidence in Burgan" added Ajeel.

Ajeel concluded "On behalf of the board, I take this opportunity to thank our cus-

tomers and shareholders for the trust they have in our capabilities and our regulators, the Central Bank of Kuwait, for their continuous support. I would also like to thank our executive management team for their leadership and their execution of the Group's strategy, and our staff for their continued support and commitment."

Furthermore, Masaud M J Hayat, Vice Chairman and Group Chief Executive Officer of Burgan Bank KPSC added, "Burgan successfully optimized its international businesses to mitigate risk and scaled up its Kuwait focus to deliver double-digit returns to the shareholders. Burgan's cautious growth strategy, focus on efficiency and asset quality has ensured continued growth in profitability" Talking about the planned sale of Bank of Baghdad (BoB), Hayat commented, "The sale of BoB will present us with an opportunity to redeploy capital towards our key growth areas, while improving our Asset Quality metrics."

Looking ahead, Hayat said, "Digital transformation of our operations is one of the main priorities of the bank's new strategy in the coming period. We look to the year 2020 to represent an important milestone by dedicating our efforts on long

term sustainability with a focus on environmental, social and economic pillars through working to develop human capital, applying the principles of good governance, and the digital transformation of our business activities. We firmly believe that this transformation will enhance the delivery of our valuable services and offers to our valued customers."

Raed Al-Haqhaq, Deputy Group Chief Executive Officer & CEO- Kuwait of Burgan Bank KPSC said, "Kuwait operations has had another strong year with improvements across the key metrics. The Kuwait Revenues grew by 7% while its loan book grew by 8%. Kuwait's Cost to Income ratio improved to 27.6% and its cost of credit improved to 50bps while its NPL ratio was stable at 1.6%.

Please note that beginning this year, the

Bank has revised its financial statements' closing process by changing the reporting date of its subsidiaries to one month earlier than the Group's reporting date. Accordingly, the reported financial results of FY'19 include only eleven months (i.e. January to November) performance of the subsidiaries instead of full twelve months as included in prior periods.

The consolidated financials encompass the results of the Group's operations in Kuwait, and its share of results from its subsidiaries, Burgan Bank Turkey, Gulf Bank Algeria, Bank of Baghdad and Tunis International Bank. Through this regional reach, Burgan Bank has one of the largest regional branch networks with 164 branches across Kuwait, Turkey, Algeria, Iraq, Tunis, Lebanon and a representative office in the United Arab Emirates.

## KD 84.7 Million

Dividends Per Share  
(Recommended) 12 Fils

Net Income  
KD 84.7 Million

Improved  
NPL to

2.5%

Return  
on Equity

10%

Capital  
Adequacy

16.8%

For Financial Results ended on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2019.

Burgan Bank Group:  
Kuwait - Turkey - Algeria - Iraq - Tunisia - UAE - Lebanon



## Business



Al-Sayer

•Our diversification and digitization strategies set NBK on the right course to maintain its leadership position

•Strong volumes across most business segments further maintain our robust balance sheet and demonstrate the high quality and diversity of our earnings

•NBK's new headquarters is a milestone in the Bank's sustainability practices

•Our dominant market share and strong financial position enable us to navigate through various operational challenges

•We are committed to supporting economic growth and Kuwait's national development plan as the bank of choice for financing mega public sector projects



Al-Sager

•Our financial results reflect the strength of our business model and our strategic focus on diversification

•We continued to grow our balance sheet while maintaining healthy asset quality metrics and robust levels of capitalization

•Our Tier 1 capital securities issuance was very well-received by investors globally, reflecting NBK's well-established reputation and prominent leadership position

•Our financial and operational results confirm the soundness of our business model and our ability to achieve further growth in the future

•We are building a global banking network that supports Kuwait's economy and its infrastructure development plan

•NBK is focused on increasing operational efficiency through its investments in technology and digital transformation to provide its customers with the best banking solutions

# NBK approves the distribution of 35% cash dividends and 5% bonus shares

## AGM held with a 77.86% quorum; BOD's proposals approved



**KUWAIT:** National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) held yesterday, its 2019 Annual General Meeting (AGM) and Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM), at which there was a quorum of 77.86%. The AGM and EGM approved the Board of Directors' recommendation to distribute 35% cash dividends to shareholders (equivalent to 35 fils per share) and the distribution of 5% bonus shares (5 shares for every 100 shares owned).

### Sustained growth

NBK's Chairman Nasser Al-Sayer delivered his speech at the 2019 AGM and EGM affirming that NBK had another year of stellar performance in 2019 across all business units and markets. That performance was clearly reflected in the continued profitable growth and the solid financial results, a testament that NBK is on the right track to consolidate its leadership in the local market and solidifies its prominent position in expanding its geographical footprint across regional markets in line with its diversification and digital transformation strategies; the cornerstones of NBK's future growth.

Al-Sayer added that in 2019 NBK reported over KD 401 million in net profits which was mainly driven by core banking activities and strong volumes across most business segments. Customer loans and advances grew by 7% y-o-y, maintaining the Group's robust balance sheet and demonstrating the quality and diversity of both operations and earnings.

"That confirms that the Group's diversification strategy is an important factor in our strong and consistent financial performance, as we continually seek to maintain diversity in both the markets we operate in and services we provide in such a way that guarantees operational excellence in the ever-changing banking environment", Al-Sayer commented.

Al-Sayer said that he was pleased to host the AGM and EGM at NBK's new headquarters which is considered a milestone in the Bank's sustainability practices, resulting in NBK's selection to be a constituent of the prestigious sustainability FTSE4Good Index Series. NBK Tower is a new landmark green-building built in line with LEED Gold requirements, being one of the first with such high certification in Kuwait and the region based on its energy saving and environment preservation designs.

"We are very optimistic regarding conserving energy and water consumption, as well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions," Al-Sayer stressed. Al-Sayer confirmed that in the backdrop of a challenging global economic environment Kuwait has been a beacon of stability thanks to its solid economic foundations that supported the stability of the operating environment despite global trade uncertainties and regional geopolitical tensions.

NBK showed a great deal of resilience in facing such challenges, thanks to its leadership position, its dominant market share and its strong financial position, thus positioning NBK to be the trusted bank of choice for financing public and private projects, as it maintains its leading role in supporting economic growth and the agenda of "New Kuwait 2035", Al-Sayer concluded.

### Strong balance sheet

Isam J. Al-Sager, NBK's Group Chief Executive Officer, said: "We are extremely proud of our solid financial performance over the past year. NBK fared

well and delivered strong results despite the challenging operating environment which was negatively impacted by volatile oil prices. NBK's performance in 2019 highlighted the strength of our business model and strategic focus driven from our diversification strategies as clearly reflected in the strong growth of our balance sheet.

Total assets grew by 6.7% y-o-y, reaching KD 29.3 billion and equity attributable to shareholders stood at KD 3.21 billion. Meanwhile, customer loans and advances increased to KD 15.9 billion, up by 10.7%. Al-Sager confirmed that NBK maintained healthy levels of capitalization, with a capital adequacy ratio of 17.8% at year-end, exceeding the Central Bank of Kuwait's guidelines and Basel III requirements.

NBK's asset quality metrics remained strong with the ratio of non-performing loans to gross loans at 1.10% and an NPL coverage ratio of 272.2%. Return on average equity was 12.3% while return on average assets was 1.42%. Al-Sager highlighted that towards the end of 2019, NBK issued USD 750 million RegS/144A perpetual Non-Call 6-Year Tier 1 capital securities. The issuance was well received by fixed income investors and financial institutions around the world, reflecting NBK's well-established reputation, solid investor confidence and its highest credit ratings among Kuwaiti and regional banks.

### Diversification strategy

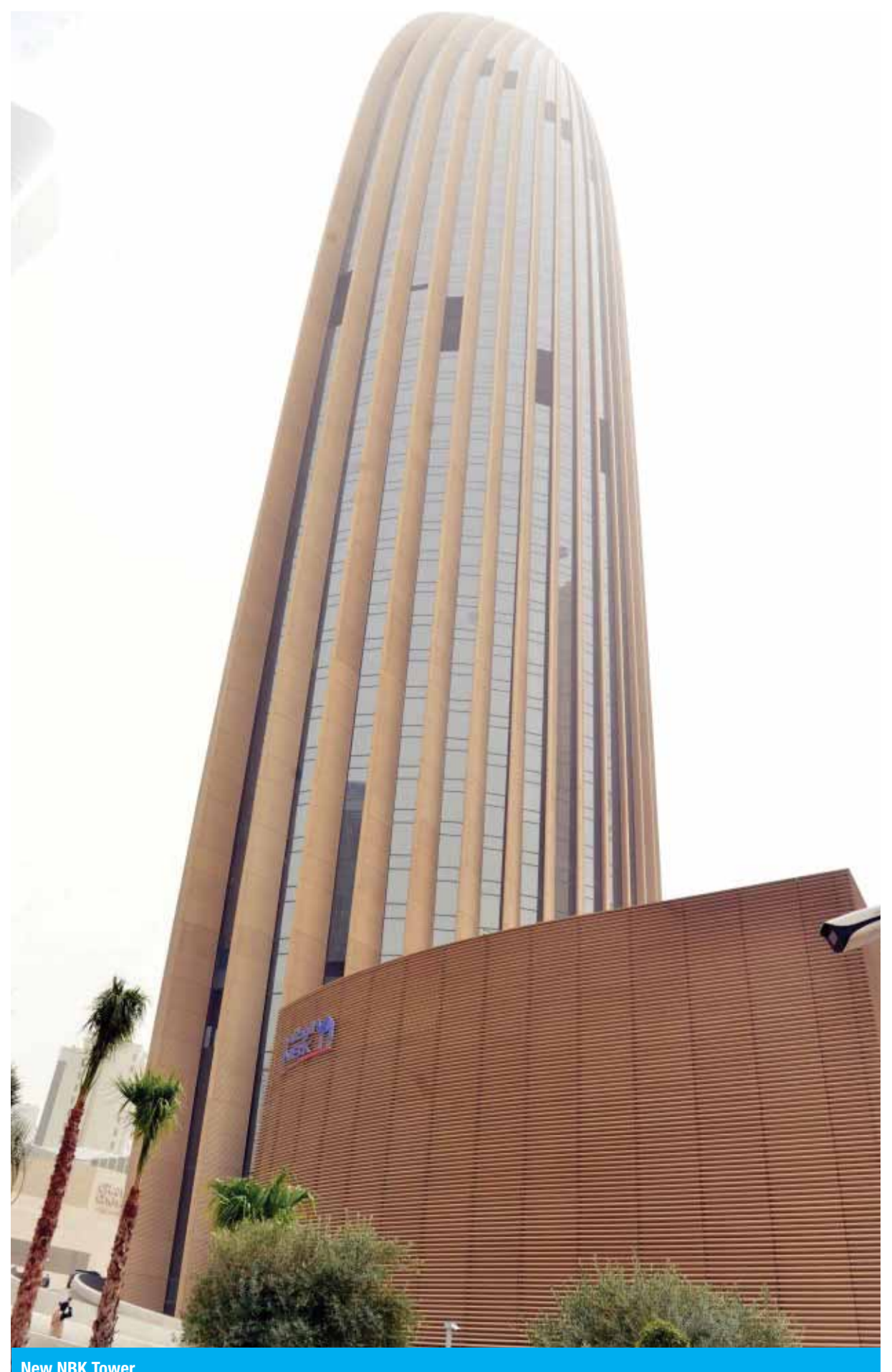
Al-Sager indicated that NBK's financial and operational performance is a testament to its solid foundations and confirms its ability to grow in the medium and long terms, as the Group's strategies continues to focus on its forward-looking development and sustainable growth. "The diversification of our income sources by focusing on Islamic Banking through our subsidiary, Boubyan Bank, and the diversity of our customer base in the MENA region were key drivers for consistently reporting strong profits.

Our international operations accounted for 28% of the Group's profit. This is a huge step in building a global banking network that fulfills the Kuwaiti economy's need in supporting "New Kuwait 2035" through playing our role as a deeply rooted bank with a vastly expanded international network and the prestigious reputation of NBK's name," Al-Sager added.

Going forward, Al-Sager stressed that NBK is focused on increasing operational efficiency through its investments in technology and digital transformation in order to reach a more efficient operational performance and provide the best solutions to the Bank's retail and corporate clients as it strives to maintain its leadership position in providing the best digital banking solutions.

### Digital future

Commenting on NBK's solid performance throughout 2019, NBK's Deputy GCEO Shaikha Al-Bahar said: "2019 was an outstanding year, not only in terms of the Bank's solid financial performance but it was a great year for NBK all around. NBK successfully managed to achieve huge strides in establishing its digital footprint and consolidating its leadership position in advanced banking technologies across the region. We continue to reap the benefits of building digital disruptive businesses to diversify income sources and mitigate risks by expanding our international operations, which is considered one of the Group's unique competitive advantages."



New NBK Tower

Business



Al-Bahar

- We made huge progress in building our digital future and consolidating our leadership position in the region
- Our profit growth and business expansion are in line with our prudent risk mitigation policies
- The launch of our in-house Digital Factory is a milestone that marks our future leading role in digital offerings
- Our international operations is a key competitive advantage as it enables us to provide unique and exceptional banking services
- We are about to launch an unconventional banking model that will represent a fundamental pillar in supporting our expansion strategy in the Saudi market



Al-Fulajj

- We continued to achieve outstanding robust results across our main business segments thanks to the bank's continuously evolving business model in the Kuwaiti market
- Our dominant share and close relationship with our clients supported our Corporate Banking Services
- We managed to successfully maintain our leadership position through offering Private Banking Services and wealth management
- We continuously develop our digital channels and have the best mobile banking applications in Kuwait
- Our CSR initiatives grew by 11% in 2019, covering all key sectors
- NBK human capital remain our most valuable asset as our employees are the driving force of our success and leadership, we are very proud of the diversity of our team

Al-Bahar added that these achievements were reflected in NBK's financial results, as profits continued to grow despite operational challenges and as the Bank accelerated its drive towards establishing its digital age through the implementation of its digitization roadmap in order to maintain its strategic competitive advantage over its peers.

In the meantime, NBK's balance sheet continued to expand while keeping strong asset quality metrics, demonstrating our deep commitment towards sustainable growth within the guidelines of the Bank's prudent risk mitigation policies. "We are proud of launching our in-house Digital Factory, which is playing a vital role in driving the Group's progress towards a digital future and supporting our digital offering in the region. With its client-centric approach, the Digital Factory is staffed by the market's sharpest and most capable FinTech minds," Al-Bahar added.

Global expansion

Al-Bahar emphasized that the continued expansion of the Group's footprint represents its most significant competitive advantage, thanks to the unique offerings that sets NBK apart from its competitors. Therefore, international operations is an essential pillar in maintaining the Bank's leadership and its continued growth as its contribution to the group's net profit reached 28% despite the lower cost of risks in the Kuwaiti market, and its contribution also increased to 25% of the total operating revenue.

"We maintain our focus on expanding our operations and continue to heavily invest in the deployment of our digital offerings across our main markets, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia," Al-Bahar confirmed. Speaking of the Egyptian market, Al-Bahar pointed out that NBK is focused on building digital platforms to complement the traditional branch-based sales and service model.

NBK Egypt is also focused on expanding its footprint in the Egyptian market as the country's economy gathers further momentum in the rollout of the wide-reaching economic reform program, as we maintain our focus on increasing our share of the burgeoning retail banking segment and continue to expand our presence throughout various Egyptian governorates.

As for the Saudi market, NBK is working on launching an unconventional banking model that will represent a fundamental pillar in supporting its expansion strategy in the Saudi market. Moreover, NBK successfully inaugurated two new branches as it maintains a permanent presence in three of the Kingdom's major cities: Jeddah, Riyadh and Khobar. NBK Saudi is also targeting to capitalize on growing its Assets Under Management (AUM) through Watani Wealth Management Company.

As for the remaining international markets, Al-Bahar indicated that NBK has established a unique banking framework which mainly maintains a strong emphasis on promoting cross-selling culture across the Bank's locations and units through its international operations in 15 countries across 4 continents. NBK also continues to expand its presence in EU markets as it strives to support international trade between Europe and the regional countries through NBK France.

Operational Excellence

Meanwhile, NBK-Kuwait CEO, Salah Al-Fulajj said: "NBK had unique operational performance in 2019 as it successfully managed to achieve outstanding growth rates across our main business segments despite

adverse headwinds that negatively impacted the non-oil sector and the delay in project award and execution, thanks to the continued development of the bank's business model in the Kuwaiti market, our primary market, which constitutes 44% of total assets and 63% of net profits".

Al-Fulajj pointed out that last year, NBK mainly focused on corporate banking services to maintain its dominant share in the local market through skillfully maintaining close relations with former and current clients thanks to its exceptional customer service and specialized professional advice, in addition to its international presences. Moreover, NBK Capital provides further support through the comprehensive and wide range of financing solutions and investment offerings, which are key elements in maintaining the Group's leading position in financing mega deals.

"NBK continued to consolidate its position at the forefront of Kuwait's oil & gas, as it remains the 'house' bank for lending to KPC and its subsidiaries as demonstrated by the KD 350 million revolving facility it arranged in 2019," Al-Fulajj added. Al-Fulajj highlighted that Private Banking Group successfully maintained its leadership position as a leading provider of wealth management services in the Kuwaiti market with improved liquidity and significant increase in its AUM which enabled the Group to record strong growth in its revenues.

Technological excellence

Speaking on digital banking products and services, Al-Fulajj confirmed that NBK has the best mobile banking applications across local and regional markets thanks to the continuous development and improvement efforts. In 2019, 17 new and updated services were launched, as Mobile app users can now book term deposits in various currencies and may also benefit from NBK Geo Alerts, the first of its kind service that allow customers to receive notifications about discounts, offers and NBK Rewards Points on their phone while shopping, in addition to further developing NBK Quick Pay.

That was reflected in a significant increase of 55% in NBK Mobile users y-o-y, and Mobile users satisfaction rate jumped to 95%. As for Social Corporate Responsibility (CSR), Al-Fulajj said: "We are very pleased that NBK has become the biggest contributor to CSR, and we are proud to be at forefront of all local and regional institutions that have introduced environmental, social and economic sustainability initiatives. Our CSR initiatives grew by approximately 11% in 2019, including our contributions to NBK Children's Hospital, in addition to numerous initiatives covering various sectors, including: health, education, youth, environment, sports, and culture".

Team spirit

Al-Fulajj concluded his message by stressing on NBK's role in achieving these accomplishments and maintaining its leadership position as a leading franchise in the private sector that attract talented and experienced employees as it continues to heavily invest in its human capital with over KD 1.5 million spent last year towards training programs in cooperation with the most prestigious universities and institutes around the world including Harvard Business School and INSEAD.

Al-Fulajj also stressed that NBK's strength stems from employing national manpower, as NBK brought its Kuwaitization ratio to 70.6%, exceeding regulatory

requirements. Moreover, 45% of the workforce consists of female employees, which is an unprecedented achievement across the local and regional banking sector.

Gratitude and appreciation

On behalf of NBK Group's board of directors and executive management, Al-Sayer expressed his deep thanks and sincere appreciation to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for their ongoing support of Kuwait's economy and prosperity. Appreciation was also extended to the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) and the Capital Markets Authority (CMA) for making Kuwait increasingly attractive to international investors.

Al-Sayer also thanked NBK's shareholders for their confidence and expressed his deep appreciation to NBK's customers in Kuwait and across all markets for their continuous loyalty and support. Furthermore, Al-Sayer extended his gratitude to the board of directors for their leadership and guidance, expressing his appreciation to NBK's Executive Management, who have endeavored to maintain the Bank's strategic path while

exploring new avenues for growth, and the bank employees who made customers' confidence and trust possible.

NBK mourns Al-Hammad

NBK's Chairman Nasser Al-Sayer concluded his message by extending his deepest condolences on behalf of NBK board of directors, management team and employees on the demise of Yaqoub Youssef Al-Hammad, former member and Chairman of NBK. Al-Sayer said that Kuwait mourns the loss of a great patriot, outstanding leader and a visionary who had immense contribution in pushing forward the country's development through his comprehensive redefinition of advancing its economy, education and society. Al-Sayer also prayed that Al-Hammad be shrouded in the mercy of Allah the Almighty, and to live in His spacious gardens, and to inspire his family patience and solace.

Distributions date

Cash dividends and bonus shares will be distributed starting Monday, 30/03/2020. The distribution will be made to the shareholders on the bank's records as of the record date Thursday, 26/03/2020.

Year	Event
1952	Emiri Decree issued to establish NBK with a capital equivalent to KD 1 million
1959	Indian Rupee substituted for Gulf Rupee, issued by Reserve Bank of India and traded for the first time in Kuwait. NBK supports the substitution process
1950s	NBK supports the establishment of some of Kuwait's most prominent companies, including Kuwait Airways, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, Kuwait Oil Tanker Company, Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries
1961	NBK replaces the Gulf Rupee with the Kuwaiti Dinar
1982	During Al Manakh crisis, NBK records no losses due to its conservative leadership
1990	Iraqi invasion of Kuwait forces NBK to manage its operations from its permanent branch in London
1991	NBK supports the Kuwaiti government with the region's largest loan, worth USD 5.5 billion
1995	NBK provides a loan worth USD 1.2 billion to support the establishment of Equate Petrochemical Company
1998	NBK introduces the first internet banking service in the Middle East
2000	NBK is the first bank in the Middle East to offer electronic US stock trading through its website
2002	Opening of the NBK Children's Hospital in Al Sabbah medical area
2002	NBK is the first bank in the GCC and Middle East to issue international bonds in global markets, worth USD 450 million
2004	NBK is the only bank in the GCC and Middle East granted a license to operate in Iraq
2007	NBK acquires Al Watany Bank of Egypt
2008	NBK avoids the negative impact of the global financial crisis, continuing to support its Kuwait and Middle East customers with all their international requirements
2012	NBK acquires a majority stake in Boubyan Bank
2015	NBK issues USD 700 million in capital securities and KD 125 million in subordinated bonds
2016	NBK provides financing for the largest clean fuel project
2017	NBK issues USD 750 million in senior unsecured notes
2017	Opening of the NBK Stem Cell Hospital for Children
2018	NBK reaches a new milestone with record profits exceeding USD 1.2 billion
2019	NBK issues USD 750 million RegS/144A Perpetual Non-Call 6-year Tier 1 capital securities
2019	NBK moves into its new corporate headquarters



Health & Science

# Pregnant women scared to give birth in coronavirus-hit China

BEIJING: Scared of the deadly new coronavirus that has swept China, pregnant women and new mothers are giving birth alone, keeping their newborns inside and switching to pricier private hospitals to avoid the risk of infection. One new mother, surnamed Xie said she gave birth to her baby girl in Wuhan earlier this month alone, because nobody from her family was allowed to come with her to the hospital in the quarantined city where the outbreak emerged in December.

With roads blocked, she had been unable to attend pre-natal checks and was afraid to go to hospitals for fear of cross-infection. "They let you out when you are delivering a baby," Xie said, saying she had chosen a special gynaecology hospital to give birth. "When I got there, there was only one ward left," she said. "During my time in the hospital I wore masks and gloves all the time and washed my hands very often. I seldom left my ward."

Some 56 million people in Wuhan and other cities in Hubei province have been under quarantine since late January. State media propaganda videos show volunteers in hazmat suits driving pregnant women to hospitals. But Xu Tingting from Huanggang

said she struggled to find a vehicle to get to hospital when she went into labor two weeks before her due date. "I was having contractions every 10 minutes, and asked my parents to take me to the hospital. It took them nearly two hours to find a car and I was panicking, thinking I'd have to deliver at home without assistance," Xu said.

"My husband was in another city and wasn't allowed to enter the town. It was the grocery store owner in our compound who finally agreed to take me in his delivery van," Xie and Xu—who had a healthy boy—are also nervous about going out to vaccinate their newborns. "I still don't know what to do yet. There's still 20 days left for my baby to get vaccinated. I hope by then the situation is under control," Xie said.

**'I am afraid'**

With some 80,000 infections nationwide and over 2,900 deaths, it isn't just in the virus epicenter where new mothers are scared. Beijing-based Angelika Fu, whose baby is due in two weeks, has chosen a private hospital despite the cost being 10 times higher. "We opted for a private hospital, although costlier, because we wanted to avoid crowds and feel safe," she said. She

says she's been trying to remain calm but that she had had "some hysterical moments".

"I think the situation is getting better and better and the risk of being infected in the hospital is much lower than a month ago. At least, that's what I want to believe," Fu said. Mental health service providers have also seen an uptick in the number of calls from anxious new mothers. "Over the last month, dozens of pregnant women and new mums have been calling us with stress or anxiety related concerns," said a volunteer at Beijing International Christian Fellowship, which runs a mental health hotline, who wished to remain anonymous.

"The uncertainty and disruption to normal life created by the epidemic was weighing down on many, in addition to the usual baby blues." Parenting groups and play areas have also been closed. Theresa Ying delivered her baby in Beijing two days after Wuhan was placed in lockdown. "I was very nervous. We didn't have enough information at the time about this virus and that caused a lot of stress," she said. "For the baby's first month vaccination, we asked a friend to buy the vaccine from Singapore and paid a nurse to come home and administer it. "It's costly, but I am afraid to take my baby out."



WUHAN: This file photo taken on February 26, 2020 shows a volunteer escorting a pregnant woman to the hospital in Wuhan, in China's central Hubei province. —AFP

The outbreak comes as China's marriage and fertility rates decline, despite the introduction of a two-child policy. Yi Fuxian, senior scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said the virus chaos will likely impact on demographics. "The

coronavirus epidemic will lead to a further decline in GDP growth, an increase in unemployment, a decline in household income, and a decline in the ability to raise children, so the fertility rate will continue to decline," said Yi. — AFP

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248 33 199

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- ◆ Cholecystectomy & laparoscopic appendectomy
- ◆ Liver, pancreas & bile ducts surgeries

**Dr. Hani Haider**  
General Surgery Consultant

http://www.international-clinic.com **Tel: 1886677**

**Scope of Clinical Practice:**

- ◆ General & Laparoscopic Surgery
- ◆ Single-Port Surgery
- ◆ Treatment of Colo-Rectal Diseases, including Colorectal Cancer
- ◆ Surgical Treatment of Inflammatory Bowel Abscess
- ◆ Treatment of Perianal Fistula & Complex Perianal Fistula (complications)
- ◆ VAAFT Procedure (Treatment of Fistula through Fistuloscope)
- ◆ Treatment of Irritable Bowel Symptoms
- ◆ Colonoscopy & Gastroscopy
- ◆ Stomach Balloon insertion & removal
- ◆ Bariatric Surgery - Lap Sleeve Gastrectomy
- ◆ Gallstones & Abdominal Hernias Surgery

◆ Colonic Hydrotherapy & Fecal Incontinence Treatment  
◆ Laparoscopic mini bypass  
◆ Transanal minimally invasive surgery

**Academic Certificates, Trainings & Fellowships:**

- ◆ American Board of General Surgery
- ◆ Fellow of American College of Surgery
- ◆ Canadian Board of General Surgery
- ◆ Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of Canada
- ◆ American Board of Colo – Rectal Surgery
- ◆ American Board of Surgical Critical Care

**Dr. Abdullah Al Haddad**  
Surgery Department  
Consultant General Surgery, Laparoscopic & Colo – Rectal Surgeon

**مستشفى دار الشفاء**  
Dar Al Shifa Hospital  
Tele:1802 555

daralshifa  
Email: aalihaddad@daralshifa.com

**DR. FAHAD AL-MUKHAIZEEM**  
Consultant Pediatrician

Consultant Pediatrician-Canadian & American Board in Pediatrics-Canadian Board in Pediatric Emergency

**Tel.: 22269369 - Fax: 22269368**  
Al-Jabriya - Block 1A - St.1 - Mazaya Building - 15th Floor - Clinic B

**DR. WALEED S BUHAIMED**  
Consultant of General Surgery  
Laparoscopic and Bariatric Surgery

**Academic Certificates – Training**

- ◆ Kuwait Board of General Surgery.
- ◆ (IFSO) member .
- ◆ Faculty member of (BEST).
- ◆ Member of Kuwait Surgical Association.

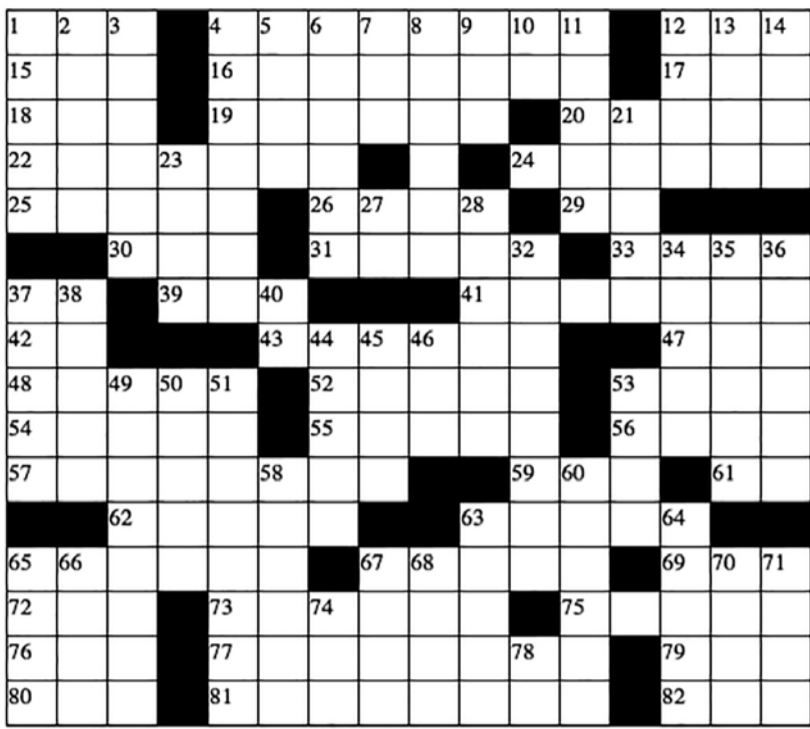
**Scope of clinical Practice.**

- ◆ Bariatric surgeries.
- ◆ Gallbladder stones surgeries.
- ◆ Abdominal wall and hernia surgeries.
- ◆ G.I. surgeries.
- ◆ Thyroid and para - thyroid surgeries.
- ◆ Anal surgeries.

email: wbuhaimed@gmail.com **Tel.: 965 22269411/ Mob.: 965 99212228**  
Jabriya, 4th Ring Road, Block 1A Floor 9 - Clover Center Mazaya Building

Stars

CROSSWORD 2452



- ACROSS
1. (Irish) Mother of the ancient Irish gods.
4. Coat with a patina.
12. A United States unit of weight equivalent to 2000 pounds.
15. A unit of pain intensity.
16. An intense and irresistible love for yourself and concern for your own needs.
17. (Old Testament) Adam's wife in Judeo-Christian mythology.
18. Black tropical American cuckoo.
19. The act of making a noisy disturbance.
20. The seventh month of the Moslem calendar.
22. A tricycle (usually propelled by pedalling).
24. German chemist remembered for his discovery of the ring structure of benzene (1829-1896).
25. (Hindu) A manner of sitting (as in the practice of Yoga).
26. A city in northwestern Syria.
29. An official prosecutor for a judicial district.
30. A metric unit of volume or capacity equal to 10 liters.
31. Deciduous South African tree having large odd-pinnate leaves and profuse fragrant orange-yellow flowers.
33. Used as a Hindi courtesy title.
37. A radioactive element of the actinide series.
39. An affirmative.
41. The brightest star in Ursa Minor.
42. A hard gray lustrous metallic element that is highly corrosion-resistant.
43. A state of extreme confusion and disorder.
47. A Kwa language spoken by the Yoruba people in southwestern Nigeria.
48. United States screenwriter and filmmaker (born in 1944).
52. An ancient region of northeastern Africa (southern Egypt and northern Sudan) on the Nile.
54. A city in southern Turkey on the Seyhan River.
55. A Hindu prince or king in India.
56. The work of caring for or attending to someone or something.
57. Southeastern European plant cultivated for its fragrant purplish flowers and round flat papery silver-white seedpods that are used for indoor decoration.
59. The residue that remains when something is burned.
61. A soft silver-white or yellowish metallic element of the alkali metal group.
62. An oily colorless liquid obtained by the condensation of two molecules of acetaldehyde.
65. Make a high-pitched, screeching noise, as of a door.
69. Inquire about.
72. A plant hormone promoting elongation of stems and roots.
73. Having excessive asymmetrical ornamentation.
75. Joint capital (with Riyadh) of Saudi Arabia.
76. A drug combination found in some over-the-counter headache remedies (Aspirin and Phenacetin and Caffeine).
77. Any of several cultivated sour cherry trees bearing pale red fruit with colorless juice.
79. A rotating disk shaped to convert circular into linear motion.
80. A serve that strikes the net before falling into the receiver's court.
81. Edit and correct (written or printed material).
82. A loose sleeveless outer garment made from aba cloth.

DOWN
1. (Babylonian) A demigod or first man.
2. The fifth of the seven canonical hours.
3. Surveying instrument consisting of the upper movable part of a theodolite including the telescope and its attachments.
4. A fine closely woven cotton fabric.
5. Largest known toad species.
6. An alloy of copper and zinc (and sometimes arsenic) used to imitate gold in cheap jewelry and for gilding.
7. (folklore) Fairies that are somewhat mischievous.
8. The state that precedes vomiting.
9. The part of the nervous system of vertebrates that controls involuntary actions of the smooth muscles and heart and glands.
10. A light strong gray lustrous corrosion-resistant metallic element used in strong light-weight alloys (as for airplane parts).
11. Worn or shabby from overuse or (of pages) from having corners turned down.
12. Large (to 3 feet) blackish yellow-banded South American lizard.
13. Rounded like an egg.
14. The compass point that is one point east of northeast.
21. Jordan's port.
23. Of the color of black ink.
27. Being one more than fifty.
28. Tropical American shrub or small tree having huge deeply palmately cleft leaves and large oblong yellow fruit.
32. Weapon consisting of a fighting ax.
34. An anti-TNF compound (trade name Arava) that is given orally.
35. Originally a British youth subculture that evolved out of the teddy boys in the 1960s.
36. Someone who lends money at excessive rates of interest.
38. Any taillike structure.
40. The blood group whose red cells carry both the A and B antigens.
44. Register formally.
45. Two items of the same kind.
46. 36th President of the United States.
49. Clouding of the natural lens of the eye.
50. Of or like a feeble old woman.
51. Durable fragrant wood.
53. A dull persistent (usually moderately intense) pain.
58. A Bantu language spoken in the Kenyan coastal areas of East Africa.
60. Having or joined by a seam or seams.
63. Fierce wild dog of the forests of central and southeast Asia that hunts in packs.
64. An indehiscent fruit derived from a single ovary having one or many seeds within a fleshy wall or pericarp.
66. A strip of land projecting into a body of water.
67. A small boat of shallow draft with cross thwarts for seats and rowlocks for oars with which it is propelled.
68. Type genus of the Aceraceae.
70. Someone who works (or provides workers) during a strike.
71. God of love and erotic desire.
74. A tight-fitting headdress.
78. A white soft metallic element that tarnishes readily.

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

An evening at home with your sweetheart could seem very appealing today, Aries. Sex and romance are very much on your mind, and you might surprise yourself with how Earthy you feel. You could decide to pick up a romantic novel or see a sexy movie. You could learn to communicate better with your partner today, both verbally and physically. Make sure you look your best, and go for it!



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Communication with a significant other might hit a brick wall, and you may not be able to get through. Money could be coming in the mail, Taurus, but probably won't arrive today. This could be a day full of frustrations, but the evening should make up for it. Love and romance look great right now. This is a wonderful day to schedule an evening with your partner - or to look for one. Enjoy!



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Communication with a significant other might hit a brick wall, and you may not be able to get through. Money could be coming in the mail, Taurus, but probably won't arrive today. This could be a day full of frustrations, but the evening should make up for it. Love and romance look great right now. This is a wonderful day to schedule an evening with your partner - or to look for one. Enjoy!



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Communications with family members and others should be clear, honest, and loving. Although your physical passions may be surging beneath the surface today, Cancer, they're still very much present. You're likely to be feeling particularly romantic, and might want to read racy novels or go to a sexy movie. This is the night to be alone with that special person. Make sure you look your best. Have fun!



Leo (July 23-August 22)

A phone call from your sweetheart might bring out your passionate, romantic side today, Leo. You'll probably have a lot to do, and therefore not be able to meet with him or her until late. All signs indicate that the encounter will be worth the wait. You should be especially attuned to your partner right now. You might know instinctively what they need from you now. Buy some new clothes, and enjoy!



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

As someone who tends to operate through your intellect, Virgo, you might be surprised by the surge of romantic passion that comes your way at this time. For today at least, your values might shift from the intellectual to the physical. You'll probably want to plan a romantic evening with someone special. You might even want to get out and spend some money on clothes. Enjoy your day.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

You're a born romantic by nature, Libra, but today you're likely to think more in terms of physical passion than idealized romance. You're likely to be especially concerned with your appearance, and might want to go for a professional makeover or buy some new clothes. The color blue might seem especially appealing right now, but don't forget to add some red for passion! Phone your romantic interest and have fun tonight!



Scorpio (October 23-November 19)

Even if you aren't romantically involved, Scorpio, you're likely to feel especially passionate today and anxious to schedule an intimate evening with someone who's caught your eye. You may not gallop off into the sunset right away, but you could dream of faraway lands. You might want to plan a trip. Be patient and don't overwhelm this person with too much passion too soon. Wait and see how things go.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

While you are Earthy by nature and enjoy physical passion, Sagittarius, this might seem even more pronounced today. Racy novels and movies could be especially appealing. You may want to plan a romantic evening with a lover. If you don't have one, don't be surprised if an old friend suddenly looks very sexy! This is a great day to shop for clothes. You're more likely to pick the most becoming items.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Your mind isn't likely to be on the job today. That could cause a number of problems. You might be feeling especially romantic. You're thinking about the evening when you can be alone with your romantic partner or at least luxuriate in racy novels or sexy movies. At lunch, buy some clothes you feel are especially flattering and then enjoy your evening!



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

A renewed sense of physical vigor could have you plunging with determination into whatever projects you need to do today. However, your mind won't really be on them, Aquarius, as you could be feeling especially passionate now. Your own intellectual and philosophical interests might be uppermost in your mind, right up there with sex and romance! That physical vigor could prove very pleasurable tonight. Enjoy your day.



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

You're in a romantic mood today, Pisces. You're more likely to notice attractive strangers you pass on the street, and attract admiring glances from them! Racy novels and movies could seem more appealing than usual, and you might do some window-shopping for sensual products. This is definitely an evening to spend with that special person in your life. Have a professional style your hair to make sure you look your best!

Wordsearch Puzzle

Old West 1

Find and circle all of the words that are hidden in the grid. The remaining 25 letters spell a George Eliot quotation.

Grid of letters for word search puzzle.

- BANKER, BARKEEP, BILLY THE KID, BOOT HILL, BRAND, CAMPFIRE, CATTLE DRIVE, CHAPARRAL, COAL, CORRAL, COWBOY, DOC HOLLIDAY, FARRIER, FORT, FURS, GOLD MINE, GOLD PANNING, GRAZE, HIRED GUN, HOGS, HOMESTEAD, HOTEL, JUDGE, LARIAT, LAWMAN, LIVESTOCK, MINER, OUTLAW GANG, PISTOL, PLOW HORSE, POSSE, RAILROAD, RANCH, TRAIL, TRAIN, RATTLESNAKE, RIFLE, SADDLE, SALOON, SHERIFF, SHOPKEEPER, SITTING BULL, STAGECOACH, TELEGRAPH, TRACKER, TRAIL, TRAIN, UNDERTAKER, WATER TANK, WELL.

Friday's Solution

Old TV Shows 4

Grid of letters for TV show word search puzzle.

- ALIEN NATION, ALLY MCBEAL, AMEN, BANACEK, BAYWATCH, BLOSSOM, CHICAGO HOPE, CHINA BEACH, COACH, DEAR JOHN, DUE SOUTH, ELLEN, EMPTY NEST, F TROOP, FALL GUY, FAMILY, FELICITY, FRAGGLE ROCK, HART TO HART, HAZEL, HERE'S LUCY, IN LIVING COLOR, LARAMIE, LOST IN SPACE, LOU GRANT, MAJOR DAD, MARTIN, MATLOCK, MR. BELVEDERE, NASH BRIDGE, PERRY MASON, PEYTON PLACE, RHODA, RYAN'S HOPE, SEA HUNT, SPIN CITY, THE ROOKIES, VEGAS, WISEGUY, ZORRO.

The hidden TV show is: LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

Friday's Solution

S A M A R A R O B A K E P T
N S U M O N A C A N A L L O
A E S O P A S C O T N E E L
F A I L U S K U B V A G A L
U N C L A S P R A M I F Y
A R U I B O A U K
P O A A R D E B I N A N N A
A R K K E A A A R D W O L F
R I A L R A L C A O M I T
K E B A B G A M E L A V A
A L A R A B A S E H D E N
C A G E P E A
L E T H A L S T E A D I E E D
A B A R A F T E R E D B A A
M O L O I L S T O V E I S M
A N A N A Y S A Y E R S E A

Daily Sudoku

Sudoku grid with numbers 5, 1, 9, 7, 1, 8, 5, 3, 9, 8, 4, 2, 3, 9, 5, 7, 6, 7, 4, 3.

Friday's Solution

Sudoku grid with numbers 8, 9, 7, 2, 4, 1, 6, 3, 5, 1, 6, 5, 8, 9, 3, 2, 7, 4, 3, 2, 4, 7, 5, 6, 9, 1, 8, 4, 1, 8, 5, 3, 9, 7, 6, 2, 5, 3, 9, 6, 2, 7, 4, 8, 1, 2, 7, 6, 1, 8, 4, 5, 9, 3, 6, 5, 2, 9, 1, 8, 3, 4, 7, 9, 4, 1, 3, 7, 2, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8, 3, 4, 6, 5, 1, 2, 9.

# Lifestyle

SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2020



Hindu devotees celebrate Holi, the spring festival of colors, during a traditional gathering at a temple in Nandgaon village in Uttar Pradesh state on March 5, 2020. Holi is observed in India at the end of the winter season on the last full moon of the lunar month.—AFP



Croatian designer Zoran Aragovic posing with protective face masks bearing his designs.

## Croatian designer launches 'cheerful' virus mask line

Inspired by the global scare over the novel coronavirus, a Croatian fashion designer has launched his own "cheerful" collection of virus masks. They offer no protection against the disease which continues to spread around the world but that has not put off buyers. "The idea for a designer mask was spontaneous," Zoran Aragovic, owner of the BiteMyStyle brand, told AFP. "Every morning while having coffee we were commenting on the coronavirus and lack of masks."

"I was joking that I would make a colorful, cheerful mask, like my fashion creations, and put it on my Instagram," said the 39-year-old from Zagreb. But Aragovic's cotton mask, inspired like his clothes by Disney characters, pop art and comic books, immediately sparked an interest across the country. Dozens of the

masks, which cost around nine euros (\$10), have been sold since he started production some two weeks ago and people continue to order them, the designer said. Aragovic, who believes that the best way to fight against fear of the virus is with positive items such as clothes, stressed that "these are not medical masks but cheerful fashion accessories".

Croatia has registered nine cases of the virus which has killed over 3,200 people across the world. More than 94,000 have been infected in 81 countries and territories, according to AFP's latest toll based on official sources.—AFP



Croatian designer Zoran Aragovic working on a protective face mask.



Croatian designer Zoran Aragovic posing next to protective face masks bearing his designs.



A picture shows a woman wearing a protective face mask designed by Croatian designer Zoran Aragovic.



A woman presenting a protective face mask designed by Croatian designer Zoran Aragovic.—AFP photos

## Surprise! Katy Perry reveals pregnancy in latest music video

It was a twofor for fans of Katy Perry: the pop star dropped a new music video—and revealed that she and her fiancé, actor Orlando Bloom, are expecting a baby. The 35-year-old Perry cradles a baby bump in the final seconds of the video for "Never Worn White," released late Wednesday. Shortly before it dropped, Perry had published a snippet of the clip, fuelling specula-

tion on social media that the singer—known for hits such as "I Kissed A Girl" and "Roar"—might be expecting.

"Let's just say it's gonna be a jam packed summer..." Perry wrote afterwards on various social media sites. "So glad I don't have to suck it in anymore... or carry around a big purse," she told her more than 108 million Twitter followers.

The songstress is engaged to Bloom, who is best known for his role as Legolas in "The Lord of the Rings" saga as well as his turn in the "Pirates of the Caribbean" franchise alongside Johnny Depp. The baby will be Perry's first and the second for Bloom, 43, who has a son with model Miranda Kerr.—AFP



In this file photo British actor Orlando Bloom (left) and US singer Katy Perry pose upon their arrival at the 2nd Monte-Carlo Gala for the Global Ocean 2018 held in Monaco.—AFP



Mamdouh Hassan carries a mummified crocodile at his home in the Nubian village of Gharb Soheil, on the west bank of the Nile river off Egypt's southern city of Aswan, some 920 kilometers south of the capital. — AFP photos



A mummified crocodile hangs above the entrance door of Mamdouh Hassan's (center) house in the Nubian village of Gharb Soheil.



A mummified crocodile hangs at a house in the Nubian village of Gharb Soheil.

## EGYPT'S NUBIANS TAME CROCODILES FOR SELFIE-SNAPPING TOURISTS

Deep in the Nubia, a region along the Nile in southern Egypt, a baby crocodile sits on Mamdouh Hassan's shoulder to wow tourists. The reptiles are a source of income for Egypt's Nubian minority, with visitors paying to marvel at the tamed creatures. But beyond bringing in tourist dollars, crocodiles play an important role in the culture of the ethnic group with a history dating to Pharaonic times and its own unique language. The Nubians traditionally lived along the banks of the Nile in southern Egypt with roots extending into northern Sudan.



Visitors watch a crocodile at Mamdouh Hassan's (not pictured) house.



Mohamed Mamdouh, the son of Hussein, shows a baby crocodile at his house.



Mamdouh Hassan (right) shows a crocodile to visitors at his house.

In Gharb Soheil, a Nubian village near Aswan, mummified crocodile heads still adorn the doors of the traditional blue and white domed homes. Crocodiles represent an important physical totem of blessings in Nubian belief. In Gharb Soheil a stuffed crocodile on the door shows that the homeowner keeps the large reptiles as pets.

Outside his humble home in the village, Hassan gently rubbed the back of Francesca—a 1.5-metre (five-foot)-long, 15-year-old crocodile. "I have raised her since she was born," the 45-year-old said lovingly of his pride and joy. "She lives on fish, meat and chicken."

### Crocodiles

During the reign of president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the construction of the Aswan High Dam created a reservoir over traditional Nubian lands. When Lake Nasser began filling in 1964, 44 Nubian villages were flooded. While the Nile's crocodiles benefited from the new habitat, Nasser never fulfilled his promise to adequately compensate Nubians with new land. Instead, about 50,000 Nubians were displaced to villages north of the dam, on the west bank of the Nile near Kom Ombo and Aswan—a narrow strip of land with limited space for agriculture.

Ever since, Nubians have demanded the return of their lands and have maintained their culture by modernizing their traditions. Keeping crocodiles became a way to supplement incomes and promote their heritage. Hassan learnt to domesticate crocodiles from his father. "My father was one of the first people in the Nubian village who really pioneered the idea of bringing in crocodiles as pets to lure tourists," he told AFP. In the 20 years since, he has developed a keen sense for where

and when wild crocodile eggs will hatch. Female crocodiles lay their eggs along the banks of Lake Nasser where Hassan watches for the baby reptiles to emerge before carrying them home. "The crocodile's aggressive nature is tempered by growing up in the home with us and being cared for," he said.

Francesca is the star of the show in the village, Hassan says. She was named by Italian tourists who enjoyed her sunny personality, so Hassan kept the name. Visitors snap selfies with the lounging beasts, while the villagers regale the tourists with Nubian folk tales about the crocodiles. Hany, a tourist from Cairo, was delighted with the spectacle of Hassan opening the crocodiles' mouths wide with his bare hands. "I came here with my family to spend school holidays, for the kids to enjoy seeing the crocs," the 35-year-old said.

### 'Angels of the Nile'

For ancient Pharaohs, the crocodile-headed god Sobek embodied the fluid nature of the Nile and was prayed to for protection from the annual

floods. A temple is dedicated to Sobek in Kom Ombo, engraved with pictograms and hieroglyphics detailing the embalming of crocodiles. To this day, Nubians maintain a tradition of crocodile taxidermy, one that remains true to a centuries-old technique. "Although we know very well the value of crocodile leather, we do not sell it... we cherish it," Hassan explained.

A dead crocodile is skinned from its gut and filled with straw or sawdust. Large crocodiles take about a month to mummify while a smaller one dries in a few days, Hassan said. "This is Franco, who died last month," he said of the large mummified head of one of his former pets. Abdel-Hakim Abdou, a curly-haired, 37-year-old cafe owner who recommends Hassan's terrarium as a must-see tourist attraction, rhapsodized about the importance of crocodiles to Nubians. "The Nile for the Nubian represents life... everything that roams in it we consider angels," he said.—AFP

## 18th century Chinese gourd sells for \$4.6 million at auction



A picture shows a rare blue, white and celadon porcelain moon flask with a dragon which belonged to the 18th century's emperor Qianlong. — AFP photos

A Chinese porcelain gourd which once belonged to the 18th century Chinese Emperor Qianlong sold for 4.1 million euros (\$4.6 million) at auction yesterday. The cobalt blue and white gourd, which represents an imperial dragon with five claws in search of the sacred pearl, went to a Chinese buyer by telephone. Auctioneer Olivier Clair, who found the object while executing a will in a Parisian apartment, told AFP that with fees, the sale amounted to more than 4.9 million euros. "There have been a number, but it remains very rare," he said. "The gourd was intended for Chinese pilgrims. Little by little, it has become a decorative symbol like a coronation sword. It is an object that interests the Chinese because it is their heritage."

The gourd was possibly looted, along with many other objects, during the sack of the Summer Palace by a Franco-English

expeditionary force in 1860 but Clair said its path to Europe was unclear. "We do not know how the object arrived in France, we only know its history for three generations. "It belonged to an old family of the paper industry which had links with the political sphere of the 19th century, no doubt relatives of Mac Mahon and Napoleon III." Imperial items from the Qianlong reign (1735-1796) are particularly sought after. A pink family porcelain bowl sold for \$30.4 million in April 2018 at Sotheby's in Hong Kong. In June 2018 a Chinese porcelain vase created for Qianlong reached 16.2 million euros at Sotheby's in Paris and a gourd of the same era fetched 5.1 million euros at a sale near Tours. — AFP



A detail of a rare blue, white and celadon porcelain moon flask with a dragon.



A picture shows the mark of the emperor Qianlong under a rare blue, white and celadon porcelain moon flask with a dragon which belonged to the 18th century's emperor.



A detail of a rare blue, white and celadon porcelain moon flask with a dragon.



A detail of a rare blue, white and celadon porcelain moon flask with a dragon.

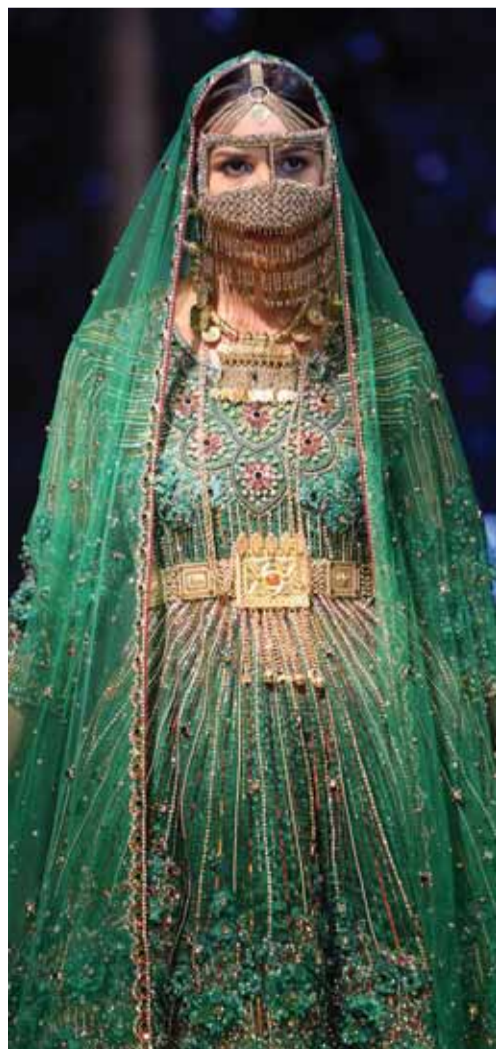


Models display creations by Lebanese designer Antoine Salameh during the launch of the 7th edition of the "Ladies a La Mode" fashion show in the Omani capital Muscat. — AFP photos

# 7TH EDITION OF THE 'LADIES A LA MODE' FASHION SHOW



Models display creations by Omani designer Faiza Al-Balushi during the launch of the 7th edition of the "Ladies a La Mode" fashion show.



## 'Star of the East' Umm Kulthum returns to light up Cairo



Revered Arab singer Umm Kulthum returned to light up the stage once more on Friday, almost five decades after her death, in the form of a hologram that delighted a packed-to-capacity crowd at Cairo's Opera House. Affectionately known in Egypt as "El Sett" ("The Lady"), Kulthum's deep, resonant voice enthralled the Arab world for decades, inspired western singers like Bob Dylan and Robert Plant, and can still be heard in Egypt's streets, cafes, taxis and Nile sailboats. At the majestic entrance of the Opera House in the Egyptian capital, a large golden plaque bearing her image greeted giddy visitors, along with a placard reading "Star of the East, Umm Kulthum"—her most popular moniker.

As the curtains were raised, a halo of light appeared in the center of the stage which transformed into a three-dimensional virtual composition of the singer, sending the audience of more than a thousand into rapturous applause. In a nod to her packed concerts of decades ago, the hologram-clad in a bright purple dress and clasp-

ing Umm Kulthum's signature handkerchief-sang from one of her most famous songs, "You toyed with my heart".

"I came today because I have always dreamed of attending an Umm Kulthum concert," Aya Yassin, a professor of medicine at Ain Shams University, told AFP. "My grandmother used to tell me about the famous Thursday concerts of hers which made me really interested in coming tonight." Umm Kulthum was born at the end of the 19th century and her career flourished from the 1920s until her death in 1975, taking in an impressive repertoire of religious, patriotic and sentimental songs and poetry.

Her concerts lasted for hours and her live radio broadcasts attracted huge audiences. Friday's virtual performance comes amid fierce debate over contemporary Egyptian music. Last month, the Egyptian musicians' union banned performances of popular electro street music known as mahraganat, which captures the wild, care-free spirit of Egyptian youth but is viewed by conservatives as overstep-



ping moral boundaries. "I am a retired soldier and I made a point of coming here because I miss art that has an ethical component," Mostafa, a 60-year-old attendee who only gave his first name, told AFP.

"I'm sick of what the new generation of singers are putting out these days and calling it art. It's

nothing but trash," he added. The performance in Cairo is not the first to feature a hologram of Umm Kulthum. Last year a virtual representation of the singer delighted adoring crowds in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. — AFP

Holograms of legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum is projected on stage at Cairo Opera House in Cairo, late on Friday, about 45 years after the singer's death. — AFP photos

## Bollywood 'Oscars' called off over coronavirus

Bollywood on Friday called off its Oscars night, the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) awards, because of the spreading coronavirus. Organizers of the Indian cinema's biggest awards ceremony said they had to postpone the three-day event in Indore starting March 27 because of the "sensitivity" of the mounting health crisis. Bollywood's biggest names including Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan and Katrina Kaif were due to attend the gala where "Gully Boy", an international hit about a Mumbai rapper, was favorite for the top awards.

Organizers said in a statement the decision to call off the show was taken "with due regard to growing concerns" around the spread of COVID-19, while keeping the health and safety of fans and the general community. "A fresh date and

plans for hosting IIFA in Madhya Pradesh will be announced at the earliest," it added. With nearly 1,800 titles released in 2018, India is the world's biggest film industry in terms of movies made and is now a major exporter.

After using venues in several countries and other Indian cities, the 2019 IIFA returned to the Bollywood capital in Mumbai. But the government has warned against holding mass gatherings because of the virus, which has infected 30 people in India so far. Many conferences, celebrations for next week's Holi religious festival and public events have been cancelled in recent days. More than 3,300 people have died worldwide from the virus. — AFP



Bollywood actors Katrina Kaif (left) and Kartik Aaryan dance on stage as they attend the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) press Conference for the 21st Edition of NEXA IIFA Weekend & Awards 2020, in Mumbai. — AFP

## SXSW festival in Texas cancelled over coronavirus fears

The South by Southwest festival in Texas has been cancelled due to concerns over the spread of the novel coronavirus, organizers and the host city of Austin said Friday. The decision comes as coronavirus concerns grow stateside and pressure ramps up over whether to cancel entertainment and sporting events that draw large crowds. "The city of Austin has cancelled the March dates for SXSW and SXSW EDU," the festival said in a statement. "SXSW will faithfully follow the city's directions."

Austin mayor Steve Adler told a news conference he had declared a local disaster in response to the coron-

avirus, and had "issued an order that effectively cancels South by Southwest for this year." The music, tech and film festival was slated to take place March 13-22, although Netflix, Apple and Amazon had already pulled out.

More than 400,000 people attended the 2019 edition of SXSW, which was headquartered in the Texas capital's convention center but hosted many events spread throughout the city. Texas has so far recorded a handful of novel coronavirus cases, and there have been more than 200 confirmed cases in the United States. Earlier this week Austin said there was "no evidence that closing SXSW or any other gatherings

will make the community safer"—but festival organizers said the situation had "evolved rapidly."

"We understand the gravity of the situation for all the creatives who utilize SXSW to accelerate their careers," organizers said, also acknowledging the hit to small theaters and vendors who rely on the annual business. "We are exploring options to reschedule the event and are working to provide a virtual SXSW online experience as soon as possible for 2020 participants," SXSW said.

### Ultra dropped

The SXSW announcement comes on the heels of Miami authorities saying they were cancelling the Florida beachfront city's annual Ultra electronic dance festival—which draws in more than 160,000 revelers—over coronavirus threats. The March 20 to 22 event was to feature sets from major DJs including Gesaffelstein and Sofi Tukker. Ultra has also canceled its edition of the festival in Abu Dhabi, which was scheduled for March 5-6.

The epidemic poses a particular challenge for Miami, which relies on tourism especially in March and April, when thousands of young people fly south for spring break. There have been more than 100,000 confirmed coronavirus infections across 92 territories worldwide, according to AFP's latest toll, and almost 3,500 deaths. Florida has recorded nine cases. — AFP



In this file photo Steven Lee Olsen, Ashley McMillen, Justin Davis, Sarah Zimmerman, Charles Esten, Barry Dean and Luke Laird perform following the world premiere of 'Bluebird' at Paramount Theatre in Austin, Texas. — AFP

## PUBLISHER CANCELS WOODY ALLEN MEMOIR AFTER BACKLASH

A leading publisher on Friday scrapped plans to release the autobiography of filmmaker Woody Allen, who has long been accused of molesting his daughter, following an outcry and a staff walkout. Hachette's announcement came after Allen's son Roman Farrow, who is extremely critical of his father, denounced the book group over "Apropos of Nothing," originally scheduled to hit shelves next month. "The decision to cancel Mr. Allen's book was a difficult one," a spokeswoman for Hachette said in a statement emailed to AFP, adding it would return all rights to the author.

Allegations that Allen molested his adopted daughter Dylan Farrow when she was seven years old in the early 1990s have dogged the Oscar-winning filmmaker for decades. The 84-year-old director of "Annie Hall" and "Manhattan" was cleared of the charges, first leveled by his then-partner Mia Farrow, after two separate months-long investigations, and has consistently denied the abuse. But Dylan, now 34, maintains she was molested.

Hachette said on Monday its Grand Central Publishing subsidiary would release Allen's memoir in the United States on April 7. It sparked an immediate backlash with high-profile investigative journalist and best-selling author Roman Farrow, brother of Dylan, saying on Tuesday he would no longer work with Hachette. Roman has long defended Dylan, who renewed her accusations against Allen in the wake of the #MeToo movement in early 2018. On Thursday, dozens of employees company employees in New York staged a walkout in protest at the decision to publish the memoir. "We stand in solidarity with Roman Farrow, Dylan Farrow, and survivors of sexual assault," the employees said in an email, Publishers Weekly reported.

The spokeswoman for Hachette said compa-



In this file photo US director Woody Allen poses during a photocall. — AFP photos



In this file photo Journalist Roman Farrow attends the Hollywood Reporter's annual Women in Entertainment Breakfast Gala, at Milk Studios in Hollywood, California.

ny executives had engaged in "extensive conversations" with staff and others in the past few days. "After listening, we came to the conclusion that moving forward with publication would not be feasible for HBG," she said. She added that the imprint does "not cancel books lightly." Allen did not immediately comment.

### 'Gratitude'

Dylan Farrow thanked all the employees who "stood in solidarity with my brother, myself and all victims of sexual abuse yesterday: words will never describe the debt of gratitude I owe to you." "For someone who has felt alone in my story for so long, yesterday was a profound reminder of what a difference can be made when people stand and unite together for what's right," she said on Twitter. Roman Farrow retweeted a post by Publishers Weekly reporting Hachette's announcement, without comment.

Dylan had described Hachette's decision to publish Allen's autobiography as "deeply upsetting to me personally and an utter betrayal of my brother whose brave reporting, capitalized on by Hachette, gave voice to numerous survivors of sexual assault by powerful men."



File photos shows Puerto Rican singer Bad Bunny performs during the Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami, Florida.— AFP

## Bad Bunny dominates first Spotify music awards in Mexico

The first ever Spotify music awards, held in Mexico City, saw reggaeton star Bad Bunny walk away with the most accolades in a show marked by a powerful performance by US-Mexican singer Julieta Venegas and dedicated to the struggle of women across Latin America. "Thank you for having me here and making a dream come true, I love you Mexico, see you soon," said Puerto Rican Bad Bunny as he accepted the top prize of Spotify Artist of the Year. In the user-generated awards, that prize went to the artist most listened to, most shared and most downloaded by Mexican users of the streaming service in 2019.

Bad Bunny, whose real name is Benito Martinez, also won in the categories of most listened to artist and artist most added to a playlist. The awards ceremony had its most emotional moment when Venegas debuted her new song "Women," after being presented by French-Chilean singer Ana Tijoux, who called for women to stand together against violence. "So that never again any of us is murdered, raped, so there is not one less of us! We don't want cheers!" said Tijoux, name-checking a number of environmental activists and other women who had been murdered in recent years.

Tijoux then handed off to Venegas, who appeared on stage

accompanied by a dozen other Latin American singers. A line from her new song states that "women are standing up, and men don't know what to do." The 100,000-capacity National Auditorium went wild for Colombian reggaeton star J Balvin, who had been tipped to win in several categories but who went home with just one—"most shared artist." Colombia's Karol G went home with the "most listened to female artist" award, and captivated the audience with her performance. — AFP



# Premier: Lebanon to default on Eurobond debt for the first time

BEIRUT: Lebanon said yesterday it would default on its Eurobond debt for the first time and seek out debt restructuring agreements amid a spiralling financial crisis that has hit foreign reserves. Foreign currency reserves have fallen to "a worrying and dangerous level which pushes the Lebanese government to suspend payment of the March 9 Eurobond maturity because of a need for these funds," Prime Minister Hassan Diab said in an address to the nation. "The Lebanese state will seek to restructure its debts," added Diab, whose self-styled government of technocrats was formed in January to tackle an intensifying financial crisis amid unprecedented protests.

The president, prime minister and senior finance officials "agreed to support the government in any decision regarding debt management, with the exception of a payment of debt maturities", the presidency said in an earlier statement. That was widely seen as a signal that officials are leaning towards defaulting on the payment due next week.

The presidency on Monday said an economic rescue plan would include "financial, administrative and banking reforms," without providing additional details. Lebanon's debt burden, long among the largest in the world, is now equivalent to nearly 170 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP). Despite a series of crisis, the country has never before defaulted, but in recent months it has grappled with its worst economic turmoil since the 1975-1990 civil war.

Foreign currency inflows have slowed. Lebanon's pound has plunged and banks have imposed tough restrictions on dollar withdrawals and transfers. According to Marwan Barakat, head of research at Bank Audi, Lebanese banks owned \$12.7 billion

of the country's outstanding 30 billion Eurobonds as of the end of January. The central bank held \$5.7 billion and the remaining were owned by foreign creditors, he said.

According to local media reports, Lebanese banks have recently sold a chunk of their Eurobonds to foreign lenders. Local banks, which own a chunk of the Eurobonds maturing on March 9, have argued against a default, saying it would pile added pressure on a cash-strapped banking sector and compromise Lebanon's ties with foreign creditors. Lawmakers, most notably those representing the Shiite Amal and Hezbollah movements, have advocated debt restructuring to preserve plummeting foreign currency reserves.

Anti-government demonstrators who have remained on the streets since October have also lobbied against repayment, fearing a depletion of reserves could further limit access to their savings. "We shouldn't have to pay the price of government shortcomings," said Nour, a 16-year-old demonstrator, during a rally outside central bank headquarters in Beirut. Lebanon's sovereign debt rating slid into junk territory long ago, but investor confidence has fallen further since the mass protests erupted.

Credit rating agencies have warned of further downgrades in the event of a default, but economists have stressed the need to protect Lebanon's foreign currency reserves. Jad Chaaban, an economics professor at the American University of Beirut, blamed the political class for Lebanon's predicament, accusing them of decades of corruption. "This 'catastrophe' or 'fireball' is the creation of a failed and criminal political class that has lied and robbed for more than 30 years," he said on Facebook.



BEIRUT: An aerial picture taken yesterday shows a view of the Lebanese capital. — AFP

He called on officials to restructure the debt and introduce an economic rescue plan that would protect modest depositors. Diab met last month with a delegation from the International Monetary Fund to discuss how to tackle the country's spiralling economic crisis. The premier asked the Washington-based crisis lender for advice,

but has yet to ask for financial assistance.

Barakat at Bank Audi said IMF assistance was necessary. "Lebanon needs first and foremost an imminent debt restructuring plan within the context of a comprehensive plan for debt management," he told AFP. "The best is to have such a plan under the umbrella of the IMF

for international financial assistance to materialize." The Lebanese pound, which has been pegged to the dollar since 1997, has plummeted on the parallel market, amid soaring inflation and unemployment. The World Bank has warned of an impending recession that may see poverty rates rise drastically. — AFP

## No going back after deadly Delhi riots

NEW DELHI: Hazra Begum has been living in fear since witnessing men chanting Hindu religious slogans, bludgeoning and burning Muslims to death in Delhi's worst sectarian riots in decades. Ten days after the violence, she is among 1,000 people at a squalid relief camp too scared to go home, wondering if the mixed Hindu-Muslim areas where the violence took place will ever recover. "I can't trust anyone now," she told AFP as she sobbed at the makeshift camp in an open prayer ground in the Mustafabad area of the Indian capital that was the epicenter of the unrest.

"I will never forget how these men wearing helmets and chanting Jai Shree Ram (Hail Lord Ram) shouted 'kill the Muslims, don't spare any of them.'" At least 50 people died in the riots on February 24-25, over two-thirds of them from India's 200-million-strong Muslim minority, according to hospital lists. One policeman was also killed. Critics blame Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist ruling party for stirring animosity between communities that have co-existed largely peacefully for decades. Modi, 69, who was chief minister of Gujarat state in 2002 when around 1,000 people perished in religious riots, insists he wants to protect India's secular tradition.

For the most part, it was the Muslims who were the victims. They were shot, stabbed, beaten to death or burned in their shops and homes in rundown districts of

northeast Delhi. The government-appointed Delhi Minorities Commission said it was "one-sided and well-planned", with "maximum damage... on Muslim houses and shops with local support." But there was violence on both sides.

In Ashok Nagar, a Hindu-dominated locality, anger was palpable as men complained how no one was highlighting their plight. "Our homes and shops have also been burnt, our people have died as well. A Hindu (security) official was stripped and stabbed to death," said Dharam Veer. "But no one seems to care about us. Everyone is saying only Muslims were targeted. This is not the case, as you can see." Both sides agree, though, that the police were slow to act. Some even accuse them of helping Hindu rioters as they went on the rampage with Molotov cocktails and pouches of acid.

Such is the fear of more violence that some Muslims, even those who do not live where the riots took place, are changing their habits, their appearance and even their names. "There seems little hope (of things getting better). Things have only gone downhill since 2014," when Modi was first elected, said a 26-year-old journalist who asked not to be named. "From lynchings to rioting, the minorities, particularly Muslims, are being persecuted with impunity. The hate has entered our households."

Student Salim, 23, said that he has changed his name on apps for ride-sharing services Ola and Uber to make it sound less Muslim to avoid arguments or even violence. "I am more conscious about being a Muslim now than I was five years ago," he told AFP. "I'll leave this country when I get the opportunity. I know that Muslims are not safe anywhere in the world but living here has just become humiliating."

Recent graduate Noor, 27, said that her mother



NEW DELHI: In this photograph taken on March 5, 2020, Muslim woman Hazra Begum (left) sits along with her family as they speak during an interview with AFP inside a relief camp at Eidgah Masjid. — AFP

had decided not to wear the Islamic burqa on an upcoming trip out of town. "This is a woman who never shied away from wearing the burqa. She used to wear it during our school parent-teacher meetings... the fear now is something else," she told AFP. Reports said men were being made to drop their trousers to prove their religion since Muslims are

often circumcised but Hindus are not.

Farhan Zaidi, 30, a marketing professional, said he was considering shaving off his beard and he and his friends now use Hindu-sounding names in public. "The problem with Muslim men is that your identity is in your pants," he said. "In reality, if I am caught, then there is no escape." — AFP

## Flights suspended from 7 nations..

Continued from Page 1

Mosque, Islam's holiest site, reversing one of a series of measures introduced to combat the coronavirus outbreak. Saudi authorities this week suspended the year-round umrah pilgrimage and also announced the temporary closure of the area around the Kaaba.

But King Salman has "allowed for the opening of the mataf (where people circle the Kaaba) for non-umrah performers" starting yesterday at dawn, SPA reported. Hundreds of Muslims were seen rotating around the Kaaba, but the area between two hills that pilgrims must go between seven times to complete umrah remained closed. Barricades blocked access to the Kaaba, draped in a gold-embroidered black cloth, while men in green uniforms cleaned the white-tiled floor. Authorities had emptied the Grand Mosque for sterilization on Thursday.

Authorities have said prayers will be allowed at the Prophet's (PBUH) Mosque in Madinah and in Makkah's Grand Mosque while the umrah is suspended, apart from during nighttime cleaning and sterilization. The suspension has left thousands of Muslim pilgrims in limbo. Around two-thirds of the 18.3 million umrah participants in 2018 were citizens and residents of the kingdom, according to government statistics. The newly established ministry of sports said it would "suspend public attendance" at all sports events starting yesterday, reflecting calls across the Gulf to cancel mass gatherings.

The number of coronavirus cases in the United Arab Emirates has risen to 45 from 30, while Qatar reported its 12th case, the health ministries in the two nations said yesterday. Saudi Arabia reported two new cases yesterday, a woman coming from Iran, via Bahrain, and another one from Iraq, via the UAE, bringing the total number of infection in the kingdom to seven, according to a statement from the health ministry.

The virus, which was first recorded in China in December, has spread across the Gulf and beyond. Most cases in the Gulf Arab states are among people who either travelled to Iran personally, or were infected by people who had visited the Islamic Republic. The United Arab Emirates, a major air transit center, business and tourism hub, has advised citizens and residents against travelling abroad and all schools are closing for a month from today. Events across the country have also been cancelled or postponed, while some sports, such as horse racing and soccer, are going ahead without any fans in attendance.

Dozens of Saudis have come forward after authorities called on Friday for people who had been in Iran during the last two weeks to inform officials, the state-run Saudi Press Agency reported yesterday, citing the health ministry. Members of Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority tend to keep their trips to Iran secret due to a bitter rivalry between the two countries. Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic relations with Iran in Jan 2016.

The Saudi Press Agency said 95 Saudis have come forward to say they are currently in Iran, while 26 said they had returned from Iran. Another seven said they were in a third country after having visited Iran, SPA said. Dubai-based Al-Arabiya TV cited Bahraini health officials saying yesterday six new cases of coronavirus were confirmed in the Gulf state, bringing its total number of infections to 62.

The death toll from the novel coronavirus in Iran continued to rise yesterday with 21 more people killed, including a politician who became the eighth official to succumb to the disease. Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour announced 1,076 additional cases had been confirmed in the past 24 hours, bringing the overall tolls to 145 dead and 5,823 infected. "More than 16,000 people are currently hospitalized as suspect cases," Jahanpour said during a televised news conference. He added that 1,669 people who were sick with the COVID-19 illness have recovered.

The Islamic republic is battling one of the world's deadliest outbreaks of the disease outside China, where it originated. The capital Tehran remains the worst-hit

province in the country, with 1,539 confirmed cases. Yesterday, a newly elected conservative MP for the city was the second Iranian lawmaker killed by the virus, state news agency IRNA reported.

Fatemeh Rahbar, 55, served as MP from 2004 to 2016 and was among the top candidates in Tehran for the conservatives, who overwhelmingly won February's general election marked by the lowest turnout in the Islamic republic's history. Seven other politicians and government officials have died in the outbreak since the country reported its first cases in mid-February.

Iran has closed schools and universities until early April, as well as suspended major cultural and sporting events and reduced working hours across the country to slow the contagion, which has spread to all of its 31 provinces. The number of infections is climbing in northern provinces in particular, Jahanpour said. More than 300 of the new cases reported yesterday were in Mazandaran province, a popular tourist destination north of Tehran on the Caspian sea.

Several provinces, including in northern and central Iran, have said they will not provide lodging to tourists in an effort to dissuade people from travelling. Gilan and Mazandaran police from Friday started preventing cars without local license plates from entering the provinces. But according to an adviser to the health minister Alireza Vahabzadeh, some locals were bypassing the restrictions by giving non-residents lifts across province borders. In a tweet, he urged people to "cooperate" with the authorities.

The World Health Organization called the spread of the virus "deeply concerning" as a wave of countries reported their first cases of the disease - which has now killed more than 3,500 people and infected more than 100,000 across 94 nations and territories. The US was battling to contain an outbreak on a cruise ship where 21 people have tested positive for the virus. The Grand Princess has been stranded off San Francisco since Wednesday - when it was supposed to dock - after it emerged that two people who had been on the ship during its previous voyage had contracted the virus. One later died.

US Vice President Mike Pence said the ship will be brought to a non-commercial dock this weekend and all 3,533 passengers and crew will be tested. The Grand Princess belongs to Princess Cruises, the same company which operated the coronavirus-stricken ship held off Japan last month on which more than 700 people tested positive.

In China, where the outbreak began in December, the virus has wreaked havoc on the world's second-largest economy, shutting down businesses and disrupting global supply chains. The negative impact was shown in official data yesterday, with China's exports plunging 17.2 percent in the first two months of the year.

Colombia, Costa Rica and Malta have announced their first cases. Florida confirmed Friday two deaths from the virus - the first US fatalities outside the west coast states of Washington and California - taking the country's death toll to 16. The number of infections in South Korea breached 7,000 yesterday - the highest in the world outside China. Two apartment blocks in Daegu - the fourth-largest city and the epicenter of its outbreak - have been quarantined after dozens of residents tested positive.

The number of cases recorded in France rose to 716 with 11 deaths. Italy, meanwhile, began recruiting retired doctors yesterday as part of urgent efforts to bolster the healthcare system with 20,000 additional staff. In China, the number of new cases reported yesterday nationwide was the lowest in weeks. The Chinese government has hinted it may soon lift the quarantine imposed on Hubei province - the locked-down epicenter where some 56 million people have been effectively housebound since late January. For the second consecutive day, there were no new cases reported in Hubei outside Wuhan, the province's capital.

But the number of infections beyond the epicenter rose for the third straight day, fuelling fears about cases being brought into the country from overseas. There have now been 60 imported cases. Many local authorities are imposing two-week quarantines on anyone who has travelled to virus-affected provinces or countries. — Agencies





## Sports

# Bangladesh thrash Zimbabwe in fitting farewell to Mashrafe

## Match reduced to 43-overs-a-side as rain halted play

SYLHET: Liton Das and Tamim Iqbal became the first Bangladeshi opening pair to score a hundred each as Bangladesh crushed Zimbabwe by 123 runs in the rain-hit third one-day international to complete a clean sweep in the three-match series in Sylhet on Friday.

Liton hit 176 off 143 balls, the highest ever individual ODI score for Bangladesh, while Tamim stayed unbeaten on 128 off 109 balls as the duo put on 292 runs in Bangladesh's highest partnership for any wicket.

Tamim had scored Bangladesh's previous highest score in the second ODI just three days ago.

Liton and Tamim guided Bangladesh to 322-3 in 43 overs before 4-41 from Mohammad Saifuddin ensured victory and gave captain Mashrafe Mortaza a fitting farewell.

It was Mashrafe's last game as Bangladesh's ODI captain after he announced his decision to step down from the position on Thursday and his teammates rose to the occasion to dominate Zimbabwe.

As Bangladesh's innings was interrupted by rain, Zimbabwe were set a revised target of 342 in 43 overs under the DLS method, but were bowled out for 218 in 37.2 overs, with Sikandar Raza making 61.

Mashrafe, who oversaw 50 wins as skipper, began the demolition in the very first over before finishing with 1-47, while Taijul Islam (2-38), Mustafizur Rahman (1-32) were also among the wickets.

"This is a great honour. My boys have been fantastic. They have given everything for the team. I'd like to say my thanks to all the boys," said Mashrafe, who was

presented with a special memento by the Bangladesh Cricket Board after the match.

### RECORD-BREAKING LITON

Striking 16 fours and eight sixes in his third ODI century and the second in the series, Liton broke the record of his opening partner Tamim, who scored 158 on Tuesday.

The match was reduced to 43-overs-a-side when rain halted play after 32.2 overs of Bangladesh's innings, and the opening duo, who had put on 182 at the time of the interruption, added another 110 runs before finally being separated. Liton was reprieved on a no-ball on 107 and was also dropped on 122 and 144 respectively by Raza and Wesley Madhevere.

Carl Mumba finally dismissed Liton as Raza took a catch at long-on to end the record-breaking partnership, which surpassed Shakib Al Hasan and Mahmudullah Riyad's 224-run stand during the 2017 Champions Trophy against New Zealand in Cardiff.

Mumba later took the wicket of Mahmudullah (three) and debutant Afif Hossain (seven) to finish with 3-69 as Tamim clubbed seven fours and six sixes in his 13th ODI century.

"It has been a very disappointing series for us. Looking for the T20s now to put this in the past," said Zimbabwe captain Sean Williams.

The two teams will next play a two-match Twenty20 international series at Dhaka's Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium on March 9 and 11. — AFP



SYLHET: Bangladesh's captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (Top) is lifted by his teammate Tamim Iqbal (R) after the third one day international (ODI) cricket match between Bangladesh and Zimbabwe at the International Cricket Stadium in Sylhet. — AFP

## Australia eye fifth T20 world title in front of huge crowd

MELBOURNE: Australian captain Meg Lanning says her team are "pumped" for their defence of the women's Twenty20 World Cup against India today with hopes high that more than 90,000 fans will cram the cavernous Melbourne Cricket Ground.

They go into the final as favourites, courtesy of being the sport's dominant side, winning four of the six tournaments so far, in contrast to Harmanpreet Kaur's India, who are in their first decider.

But with large numbers of Indian fans expected in the 100,000-capacity arena, there will be little in the way of home advantage. Organisers have set their sights on beating the official world attendance record for a women's sporting fixture today, to coincide with International Women's Day.

That was set at the 1999 football World Cup final, when 90,185 watched the United States beat China at the Rose Bowl in California. While widely accepted as the benchmark, an estimated 110,000 are said to have attended the Mexico-Denmark women's World Cup Championships final in 1971, but it was not a sanctioned event. Pop superstar Katy Perry, who this week revealed she is pregnant, has been recruited to help get punters through the turnstiles, performing before and after the game. As of Friday, more than 75,000 tickets had been sold for a match that marks the culmination of a 17-day, 10-team, tournament that has proved both entertaining and competitive.

"It seems like it has sort of fallen into place a little bit, and today is going to be massive," said Lanning ahead of Australia playing their sixth successive final. "So hopefully there is 90,000 people there. Everything's been done that could possibly be done, and we're just really pumped



MELBOURNE: Australia's Alyssa Healy bats in the nets ahead of the Twenty20 women's World Cup cricket final, in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

we get to be out in the middle and play in front of everyone." The final will be a repeat of the tournament opener, when India upset Australia by 17 runs after leg-spinner Poonam Yadav ran riot. It made every game afterwards a virtual must-win for Lanning's team, and they rose to the task despite tournament-ending injuries to Tayla Vlaeminck and Ellyse Perry.

After beating Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, they edged New Zealand before overcoming South Africa in a nerve-shredding and rain-affected semi-final. "It's been a hard road, certainly not smooth, but we've given ourselves a chance," said Lanning, who is wary of the threat posed by India. "They're a class side, they've been playing excellent cricket through the tournament."

### A LOT OF LOVE

India went through the group phase as the only

unbeaten side, on the back of quality spin bowling and the exploits of teenage batting prodigy Shafali Verma. After upsetting Australia, they beat Bangladesh, New Zealand and then Sri Lanka before automatically making the final as Group A winners after their semi-final against England was washed out.

"Rather than thinking about what is going to trouble us, it's only about being there, enjoying the moment and giving our best," said Kaur. "One thing we have to keep in mind, today is a fresh day, a fresh start. We have to start from ball one." Like Lanning, she is relishing the chance to be part of a match that has the potential to take women's cricket to another level. "We were hoping we'd get there because everybody's feeling very positive about women's cricket at the moment," she said. "We will try to give our best. If we win, definitely we'll get a lot of attention and a lot of love from back home." — AFP

## Secret behind Shafali Verma's trademark shot

NEW DELHI: India opener Shafali Verma dancing down the track to hit back over the bowler's head may look ridiculously effortless but it is the result of practising the shot at least 50 times a day, says the coach who nurtured the batting sensation.

Verma's explosive batting has powered India to their maiden final in Twenty20 cricket's biggest tournament despite the prolonged run droughts of fellow opener Smriti Mandhana and skipper Harmanpreet Kaur.

The 16-year-old has scored at a strike rate of 161 - the highest by any frontline batswoman in the competition - and her nine sixes are also the most by anyone in this year's tournament. She has shown a particular penchant to charge out and hit bowlers over their head, a shot she honed under coach Ashwani Kumar's watchful eyes at the Shree Ram Narain Cricket Academy in Rohtak.

"We made her play every shot, including that, at least 50-times-a-day," Kumar told Reuters by telephone from the north Indian city in Haryana. "This is how you build muscle memory. Obviously she was a natural striker of the ball. We didn't overhaul her style, we just polished it."

Verma is currently the top ranked Twenty20 batswoman, a remarkable rise for the daughter of a goldsmith who had to cut her hair and masquerade as a boy

to get enough practice early in her career.

"She was barely 12 when she enrolled but within months she started striking the ball so hard that we started fearing for the safety of other girls in that group," Kumar said. "So we put her in the senior group and she then started practising with the boys."

Kumar's academy has produced quite a few first class cricketers and he got some of them to bowl against Verma. One of them was Haryana quick Ashish Hooda, who was immediately struck by Verma's talent and fearlessness.

"Being a Ranji Trophy-level player, you obviously don't want to bowl fast and injure an academy kid," medium pacer Hooda told Reuters. "So I began with a short run-up and was surprised by her ball-striking."

"Then I went full steam but she did not flinch and played quite a few shots. I knew she was special and will play for India one day, though could not imagine it would be so fast." Verma has strong arms and shoulders and boasts excellent hand-eye coordination which leaves little margin of error for the bowlers.

"She is blessed with certain traits but one has to work hard to get the best out of them," Kumar said. "To her credit, she is a fast learner and hard-worker. The only thing she probably needs is to mix more singles and doubles in her batting."

"But she's very young and will only grow better with experience." As for his advice to Verma ahead of today's final against defending champions Australia, Kumar said he did not want to clutter her mind.

"I just wished her well and asked her to follow whatever her captain and coach tell her." — Reyters



MELBOURNE: India's Harleen Deol (L) and Shafali Verma (R) prepare to train in the nets ahead of the Twenty20 women's World Cup cricket final, in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

## NZ's Cotton, first woman to umpire T20 WCup final

MELBOURNE: New Zealander Kim Cotton is set to become the first woman to umpire the final of a major global cricket tournament after being appointed for the Women's Twenty20 World Cup decider at the Melbourne Cricket Ground today.

Cotton, a lawyer by profession, will stand alongside Pakistan's Ahsan Raza for the clash between defending champions Australia and first-time

finalists India on International Women's Day.

Barbadian Gregory Brathwaite will be the TV umpire while England's Chris Broad will be the match referee.

A lawyer by profession, Cotton umpired Australia's weather-hit semi-final win over South Africa. Today's match will be her fifth of the tournament. — Reuters

## T20 World Cup final highlights India's gender pay gap

NEW DELHI: When defending champions Australia compete in the Women's Twenty20 World Cup final in Melbourne today, they will earn the same as their male counterparts would - in stark contrast to their rivals, India.

That the match, expected to attract a sell-out crowd of mainly Australian cricket fans, takes place on International Women's Day has only intensified the debate surrounding the gender pay gap that India's sportswomen have to contend with.

In cricket-mad India, male players are revered as gods, paid handsomely and showered with lucrative endorsement deals, from watches and shoes to snacks, headphones and even toothbrushes. The women barely get a look-in.

Sports analysts say they are trapped in a vicious cycle - without the right resources, they face a disadvantage when playing at the top level, which in turn means they are less likely to get investment.

"The women's game is stuck, like Cinderella, at the hearth while the men are off partying," said Prem Panicker, a senior cricket journalist who has written extensively about the issue.

"And that is unfair to the women, to the game and to us spectators." A-list women cricketers including T20 captain Harmanpreet Kaur, opener Smriti Mandhana and spinner Poonam Yadav make about \$68,000 each annually despite progressively better performances, including reaching the 50-over World Cup final in 2017. By contrast, the top male players, led by captain Virat Kohli, earn nearly \$1 million on the annual contract of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), which is the world's richest.

But they can make many times that through sponsorships, endorsement deals, bonuses and the Indian Premier League. Last year, Kohli featured on Forbes' list of the world's 100 highest-paid athletes, with estimated earnings of \$25 million.

Several top women cricketers contacted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, including Mithali Raj, captain of the national team in Test and one-day international cricket, were unavailable for comment.

Ananya Upendran, editor at cricket news website Women's CricZone, said female players' pay had gone up, but they were still "paid a pittance in comparison to the men".

### 'MEN BRING REVENUE'

The conversation around equal pay in professional sports has gained momentum since members of the US women's soccer team sued their federation over the disparity. India's female athletes, however, have seldom brought it up.

Mandhana - the 2018 International Cricket Council (ICC) women's cricketer of the year - even said it would be unreasonable for women to ask for equal pay. "We need to understand that the revenue which we get is through men's cricket," she told reporters in January.

"The day women's cricket starts getting revenue, I will be the first person to say that we need the same thing. But right now, we can't say that." Cricket experts have urged the BCCI to market the women better and give them more opportunities to play, such as their own version of the cash-rich Indian Premier League (IPL).

While the women played a mini IPL version last year, the BCCI chief said in December that a full-fledged tournament was unlikely before 2024, citing a lack of players. The BCCI did not respond to requests for comment. Former India women's captain Anjum Chopra said the national team, who are maiden finalists, had a long way to go before they could be compared with Australia, who have won a slew of major trophies over decades. — Reuters



**25** France 'on alert' for Grand Slam complacency in Scotland

**26** Australia eye fifth T20 world title

**27** James scores 37 points as Lakers get best of Bucks



## Liverpool wins, Arsenal close gap on top four

**LONDON:** Liverpool moved to within nine points of claiming the Premier League title by coming from behind to beat Bournemouth 2-1 as Arsenal boosted their charge towards the Champions League places with a 1-0 win over West Ham.

Jurgen Klopp's men had suffered three defeats in four games in all competitions, including their first in the Premier League for 45 matches at Walford last weekend. Callum Wilson's controversial early opener threatened another major upset. But all of Liverpool's setbacks of late have come away from Anfield and they set an English top-flight record for 22 consecutive home league wins as two quickfire goals from Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane turned the game around.

The runaway league leaders still needed a miraculous goal-line clearance from James Milner to deny Ryan Fraser an equaliser, but defeat leaves Bournemouth still marooned in the bottom three.

"We are not geniuses, but we can really fight and that's all we have to do until the end of the season and see what we get from it," said Klopp.

The spread of coronavirus could have a big impact on the Reds' title celebrations in the weeks to come with the possibility of games being played behind closed doors. But the abandonment of the normal pre-match ritual of handshakes was the only disruption to the Premier League calendar this weekend. Despite the coronavirus risk there was no halt to players celebrating wildly with each other and Arsenal players piled on top of Alexandre Lacazette after a long VAR review of the Frenchman's winner at the Emirates.

West Ham were made to rue a series of missed chances as they remain just outside the relegation zone on goal difference. Jarrod Bowen hit the woodwork and Bernd Leno made a string of saves from Michail Antonio and Sebastien Haller, but it was Arsenal who made the breakthrough 12 minutes from time.

Mesut Ozil was originally flagged offside as he latched onto Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's deflected shot and headed down for Lacazette to sweep home. But the goal was finally given after a delay of several minutes to move Arsenal to within five points of the top four. Wolves missed the chance

to move into the top four as a disappointing 0-0 draw at home to Brighton left them still two points adrift of Chelsea in fifth. A vital point for the Seagulls edges them two points clear of the relegation zone.

Sheffield United moved above Manchester United and Tottenham into sixth to further their dreams of Champions League football next season thanks to captain Billy Sharp's winner to beat bottom-of-the-table Norwich 1-0.

Roy Hodgson celebrated his new contract as Crystal Palace boss with a 1-0 win over Walford as the Eagles moved into the top half of the table. Newcastle also secured the win that should guarantee their survival courtesy of Allan Saint-Maximin's strike to beat 10-man Southampton 1-0.

Moussa Djenepo gave the Saints a mountain to climb when he was shown a straight red card for a lunge of Isaac Hayden on 28 minutes. Alex McCarthy kept Southampton in the game as he saved Matt Ritchie's penalty, but Saint-Maximin stabbed home the winner 11 minutes from time to take the Magpies eight points clear of the drop zone. — AFP

## Labuschagne hits century but SA sweep series

**POTCHEFSTROOM:** Australia's Marnus Labuschagne hit a maiden one-day international century on returning to his South African roots - but could not prevent South Africa from completing a series clean sweep in the third and final one-day clash at Senwes Park yesterday.

Applauded by a large group of his South African family, Labuschagne made 108 in an Australian total of 254 for seven after they were sent in to bat. South Africa were always ahead of the required rate and coasted to a six-wicket win with 4.3 overs to spare. Man of the match Jon-Jon Smuts (84), Kyle Verreynne (50) and man of the series Heinrich Klaasen (68 not out) made half-centuries.

Klaasen hit 242 runs in the series and was only dismissed once. "It's been a fantastic couple of weeks for me," he said. It was South Africa's third successive one-day series win against Australia and their 11th win in 12 matches against them, going back to September 2016.

"It's been disappointing but credit to South Africa, they put us under pressure with bat and

ball," said Australian captain Aaron Finch. It was a bitter-sweet day for Labuschagne, who was born in Klerksdorp, 50km away, and started school in Potchefstroom before his family moved to Australia when he was nine years old.

He said it was "very special" to score a century so close to the town where he was born. "I carried on like a bit of a goose," he said on SuperSport television of his emotional celebration on reaching his hundred, "but it was amazing. I have 50 of my family members out there from all over South Africa."

But he was quick to add there were no divided loyalties. "I left so young, I love Australia, it's my country," he said. "Although I was born in South Africa and there's a little spot in my heart for the country, I'm Australian through and through."

Labuschagne, with help from D'Arcy Short (36), Mitchell Marsh (32) and Jhye Richardson (24 not out) had to rebuild the innings after the South African bowlers took advantage of early life in the pitch and reduced Australia to 55 for three after 15 overs.—AFP



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