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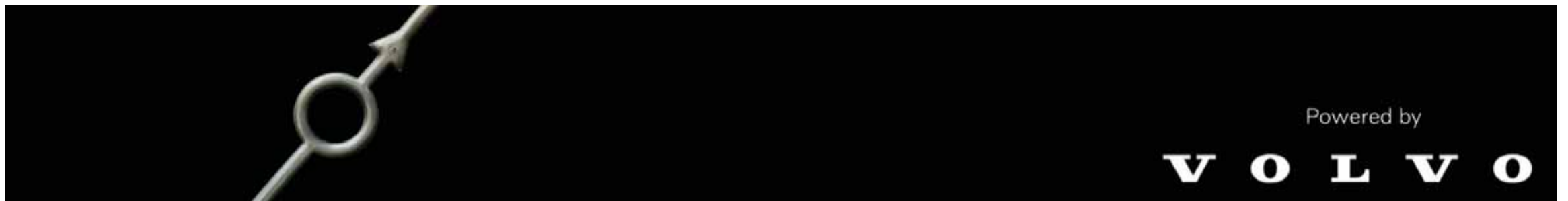
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Speaker says no plans for curfew, but not ruled out

8 new coronavirus cases in Kuwait • Malls, salons closed • Bursa plunges



KUWAIT: Expatriate workers returning from Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon arrive at a health ministry containment and screening zone for COVID-19 at the Mishref fairgrounds yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: National Assembly speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem yesterday quoted the defense minister as telling MPs that there are no immediate plans to impose a curfew now, but nothing is ruled out. "MPs asked the defense minister if there is an intention to impose a curfew and he said that all precautionary measures are not ruled out, but no decision has been taken now to impose a curfew," Ghanem told reporters after a meeting with the defense minister at the Assembly.

The minister added that as long as people cooperate with the measures announced by the government, the chances of imposing a curfew will be lower, Ghanem said. The speaker said lawmakers asked the minister that any measure should be taken gradually and not suddenly. He said the defense minister reiterated that "now and in the short term, there are no plans to impose curfew, but in the mid- and long-term, it is not ruled out and it depends on the extent of cooperation by the people". Ghanem appealed to the public to abide by the government measures so that there will be no need for additional measures.

Health Ministry Spokesman Abdullah Al-Sanad meanwhile told a press conference yesterday that imposing curfew remains one of the options. The talk about curfew comes after the Cabinet decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber-shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread

of the coronavirus. The government also allowed restaurants to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are queues, there must be a distance of at least one meter between people.

These measures come after the government halted all flights and shut down the public and private sectors in the most stringent restrictions taken in the entire Middle East. The health ministry also announced eight new coronavirus cases, all of Kuwaiti citizens. Three had returned from Britain, one from Iran, one from France via UAE and three others came in contact with the three people who returned from Britain.

This brings the number of infections to 112, but the ministry said two more cases were cured yesterday, bringing the number of cured cases to nine. The ministry said as many as 324 people have been allowed to leave quarantine. Of the 103 infections, four are being treated at the intensive care unit.

Citizens and residents had their temperatures tested before entering banks, where long queues formed yesterday after the state limited the number of operational branches. Masks and gloves were distributed to those in line. Kuwait, where the ban on international flights began on March 13, has offered its citizens stranded at London's Heathrow Airport paid accommodation at an airport hotel with three meals a day, according to an embassy notification seen by Reuters.

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Iran closes shrine as 113 more die; Aqsa Mosque shut

TEHRAN/JERUSALEM: Iran shut a key Shiite tomb and appealed yesterday to its citizens to stay at home to halt a coronavirus outbreak it said has claimed over 700 lives and infected nearly 14,000 people. The new overall tolls announced by the health ministry included another 113 deaths and 1,209 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection. People "should cancel all travel and stay at home so that we may see the situation improving in the coming days," ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said.

In line with measures to stop the virus, the tomb of Imam Reza in Iran's holy Shiite city of Mashhad was closed to pilgrims until further notice. "Currently, the porches of the mausoleum and generally all the covered spaces of the holy shrine are closed," a spokesman for the shrine told AFP. All collective prayers had also been cancelled "except in open spaces and courtyards" of the shrine, he added.

Jahanpour said the total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection across Iran was now 13,938. Tehran province had the highest number of new infections with 251 fresh cases. But Khorasan Razavi province, home to the holy city of Mashhad, followed with new 143 cases to a total of 568. "Cases there will probably increase," the official said, calling on everyone to refrain from travelling to the northeastern province.

The outbreak in Iran is one of the deadliest outside of China, where the disease originated. Jahanpour called on Iranians to "take the coronavirus seriously" and especially be mindful of elderly relatives who are most vulnerable to the infection. Despite such warnings people were still seen crowding public areas on state television. Between feel-good programming of bloopers and comedy, it showed a bank manager at a busy branch calling on people to do their transactions online.

Iran said on Friday that security forces would clear streets nationwide within 24 hours so all citizens can be checked for coronavirus. But Iranian media gave no indication of the operation taking

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Virus changes Gulf habits; Arabs treat panic with humor

DUBAI: No shisha pipe sessions, deserted streets, mosques and shopping malls, drones in the sky broadcasting public health warnings - the new coronavirus has turned life upside down in Gulf societies. More than 800 cases of the COVID-19 have been recorded so far across the six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but so far no deaths. Most of those infected have been people returning from nearby Iran, where more than 700 people had died in the outbreak by yesterday.

Facing a mounting public health threat, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman have taken drastic measures to

combat the pandemic. "It is as if today is the weekend and not the start of the week," Amal Al-Hashem, a Dubai resident of 15 years, told AFP on a largely deserted street yesterday, the start of the week in the Gulf.

Kuwait has taken the strictest measures in the GCC by largely locking down the country over the weekend, the only nation other than Italy to do so. Kuwait City's main airport road was empty as all commercial flights to and from the nation were suspended. Drones in the skies were sounding messages in multiple languages urging people to return to their homes.

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RIYADH: A waiter wearing a mask serves a Saudi family at a restaurant along Tahlia Street in the center of the Saudi capital yesterday. — AFP

Philippines closes off capital to fight virus

MANILA: Police began closing off access to the Philippines' sprawling and densely populated capital Manila yesterday, imposing a quarantine that officials hope will curb the nation's rising number of coronavirus cases. Officers in military fatigues and armed with rifles blocked off main roads into the city of some 12 million as domestic flights to and from Manila were halted early yesterday for a month-long isolation of the capital.

Mass gatherings and school at all levels have also been called off, but delays and exceptions have led public health experts to question how effective President Rodrigo Duterte's measures will be. Striking steps were also being taken elsewhere in the country, with one church in the central Philippines deciding to hold its Sunday service with worshippers separated by yellow barricade tape.

The tape crisscrossed the pews so that no two worshippers could sit next to each other. Though the Philippines has detected a fraction of the infections seen in hot spots such as China and Italy, its confirmed cases nearly doubled in recent days to 111, with eight deaths. "We are sorry for

the inconvenience, but we have orders to follow," said police corporal Meljayric Sajonia at a checkpoint on the southern edge of the capital. The sealing of the city will not be total, as people going to work will be allowed to enter through checkpoints. Buses and trains will continue to operate inside Manila.

Passengers who showed work ID cards were allowed through, with temperature checks at some entry points. "I have no problem with the checkpoints," said Michael Sausa, a hotel supervisor. "It's better that we prevent the spread of the virus." Ahead of yesterday's closure, people packed grocery stores to stock up, and tens of thousands also boarded buses leaving the capital while it was still permitted. Buses continued to roll into Manila's main transit hubs yesterday, but many had one vacant seat between passengers as a precaution against the virus.

Manila's local leaders moved on Saturday to impose an 8:00 pm to 5:00 am curfew, with exceptions for travel to work, buy essentials or seek medical assistance. However, Duterte's spokesman Salvador Panelo said the president would have to approve a curfew covering the entire city and has not yet done so. Mayors of Manila's 17 local government areas are also pushing for shopping malls, the centres of life in the country, to be temporarily shut. They remained open yesterday but with temperature checks and free hand sanitizer at entrances. — AFP

Trump tests negative for virus as US expands travel ban



WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump speaks to reporters during a press briefing about the coronavirus on Sunday. — AFP

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump has tested negative for the novel coronavirus, his physician said, following concerns over his exposure to a disease that has paralyzed the globe. Trump agreed to the test after coming in contact with several members of a Brazilian presidential delegation visiting his Florida resort who have since tested positive for the virus.

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Kuwait Fights Coronavirus

Fairground screenings of expats for COVID-19 negative: Ministry

COVID-19 global recovery rates call for hope, optimism: Spokesman



A Kuwaiti health ministry worker gestures before scanning returning expatriate at the screening center in Mishref.—Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



KUWAIT: A man carries a toddler as they arrive at a Kuwaiti health ministry containment and screening zone for COVID-19 coronavirus disease for expatriates returning from Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, in Mishref yesterday.



Kuwaiti health ministry workers look on before scanning returning expatriate at the screening center in Mishref.

KUWAIT: Recovering from the coronavirus (COVID-19) and the announcements made in this regard are matters of technicality rather than anything else, said Health Ministry spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad yesterday. Answering the press on the sideline of the ministry's coronavirus update conference, Dr Sanad revealed that coronavirus screenings for thousands of expatriates, held in Mishref area's fairground, all came out negative so far after four days of extensive tests. The official affirmed that the Health Ministry was up-to-date with the latest data on the coronavirus, especially from the World Health Organization (WHO), taking the necessary steps and decisions to announce new measures to counter the spread of the virus. Any recovery announcement will be made according to proper protocols to ensure the safety of the people, he reiterated. He urged citizens and expatriates alike to stay at their homes and follow up on the most recent statements and news connected with coronavirus.

Meanwhile, Dr Sanad said that the global recovery rates from the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) call for hope and optimism, especially with some 72,000 overcoming the disease. In a press conference, Dr Sanad affirmed that the coronavirus had become, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), a pandemic affecting hundreds of countries across the globe. Outside of China, there are some 64,000 cases, while in China there are about 81,000 cases, he said. In the eastern Mediterranean, which has 22 states including Kuwait, 17 countries confirmed coronavirus cases, indicated Sanad, adding that there were five countries, which have yet to confirm or announce COVID-19 cases.

So far, there were 9,081 swipes and samples

Recovery rates



Eight new cases, total at 112

taken from those in Al-Khairan, Al-Mangaf, and Al-Joun quarantine centers in Kuwait, stated the official who renewed his calls for Kuwaitis and expatriates to remain at their homes and places of dwelling to prevent spread of the infection. Dr Sanad revealed that the number of those clearing the quarantine had amounted to 324 in total. He went on to say that it was paramount for the populous to follow instructions and procedures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. More recently, a 190-passenger flight coming from New York had been subjected to coronavirus countermeasures according to medical protocols, he affirmed.

Eight new cases

Eight new cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) were discovered in Kuwait yesterday,

bringing the total of infections to 112. During the press conference, Dr Sanad revealed that six of the newly announced cases were of Kuwaiti citizens returning from the UK and individuals who came in contact with those infected. One case was of a Kuwaiti recently returning from France via the UAE and the other was of a fellow citizen returning from Iran, he said, adding that the latter's case was among those quarantined in Khairan resort. Meanwhile, two coronavirus patients recovered from the global-spreading infection, bringing the total of those overcoming the disease to nine in Kuwait, said Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah yesterday. Sheikh Basel affirmed that laboratory and x-ray test results had shown that the two patients were clear of the virus. The two will be sent to a specialized recuperation ward for COVID-19 patients in preparation for hospital discharge, he noted. The Health Minister revealed that four of eight cases in the coronavirus ICU were released and moved to other wards. — KUNA

MoH's anticipation of coronavirus accurate: PM

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministry of Health's (MoH) anticipation of magnitude of coronavirus was "accurate," His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah said yesterday, warning that "we don't know for how long this pandemic will continue."

His Highness the Prime Minister, during a visit to the MoH headquarters to see first-hand preventive and contingency plans to address spread of coronavirus, said credibility of the ministry earned it appreciation of the world. "Kuwait was committed to transparency and honesty since day one," he said. His Highness the Prime Minister said His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah instructed the government to spare no effort to fight the virus, also known as COVID-19. He noted that Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah coordinated efforts with his GCC counterparts in compliance with World Health Organization's regulations. "The responsibility is upon us all. We are working as one team to contain this pandemic," un-

derlined His Highness the Prime Minister. "What we see now is like the tip of an iceberg whose depth is unknown, and we don't know how long this pandemic will continue to exist," he said.

He noted there were countries around the world with huge capabilities and trying to contain the virus. "We need to think of dealing with sustainability of the pandemic, which required further efforts." His Highness the Prime Minister said some of the MoH's measures were tough but in the best interest of the health situation of people. His Highness the Prime Minister was then briefed by the MoH executives about the preventive and contingency plans to limit the spread of the virus. —KUNA

Workers face nonpayment, forced to take leaves

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Early morning yesterday, mall employees reported to work even though they had heard the news before midnight of the closure of malls and salons. Most workers were afraid of a deduction from their salaries if they failed to show up to work. "I knew they will no longer allow workers to come inside malls, but I still came because my employer told me to report to work," said Nash, a shop attendant at Marina Mall. "My boss called me and said you should go and check and if they will allow you to enter the mall," he said.

A beauty salon worker in Salmiya said her boss called her at night and told her and her colleague

not to report to work, but early morning yesterday, the boss changed her mind. "She told me to take all the salon equipment because we will be providing home service; my colleague and I were laughing because we had planned to clean the house, but it's okay. We are all here to work, so I am ready to work at any time of the day. My only wish is for the two of us not to encounter a positive coronavirus carrier - we don't want to be infected," the salon worker named Mina told Kuwait Times.

A restaurant worker in Qurain told Kuwait Times they were all asked to work, and failure to show up means no salary. "From the beginning of the government declaration of the holidays, we were asked to work. But the problem is we do not have customers. But it's okay as they said they will give us our salaries," said the barista.

Another worker in a mall complained of non-payment of salaries during the mall closure period. "Today we were asked to report to work only to sign a document in which we needed to agree to non-payment of salaries until March 29. I signed it because the HR officer told me if you will not sign, you can resign and go back to your country," she said.

"I hope the government of Kuwait forces the employer to pay the salaries of the workers. We don't want this problem that we are all experiencing. I want to work and get money. The problem is they said they are not ready to pay us - why pass the burden to us? At the end of the day, I have to pay my house rent and other expenses. Why should they be so heartless with their workers," she asked.

Another big company reportedly asked their workers to take annual leave instead of reporting to work without customers. "At the start of this coronavirus issue and when our company felt maybe the issue will last for long, many of us were asked to take our annual leave. We agreed because we don't have any option. Even if we are at the accommodation and doing nothing, the annual leave is in effect. We can no longer ask for another leave this year. They told us to use the annual leave at home, because even if we want to go out, we cannot because all countries around the world are locked down," a worker said. For workers in the public sector, the Civil Service Commission has promised to continue paying salaries for the duration of the holidays declared by the government.

Kuwait aviation body issues new flight circulars

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has issued two additional circulars pertinent to cargo flights and arrivals to Kuwait. Circular No 30, which handles cargo flights, states that an operation request must be sent to the DGCA, including the information of the flight, details of the shipment, and air crews. It also requests air crews to adhere to the procedures of the health authorities at Kuwait International Airport. The request can be sent to the following e-mail: schedules@dgca.gov.kw. In addition, air crews are allowed to use the Kuwait International Airport transit hotel if they wish, it said, noting that health procedures are mandatory and will be applied.

Circular No 31, which targets all arrivals to Kuwait, states that all arrivals from Egypt, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Italy, Iran and Iraq are to be placed under quarantine for 14 days. All arrivals to Kuwait International Airport coming from other countries must enter 14-day mandatory home self-quarantine, according to the circular. Meanwhile, Jazeera Airways, a Kuwaiti private airline, said its fleet of 14 planes is ready to carry Kuwaiti citizens, goods and medical supplies to Kuwait under these circumstances. It added in a statement that it was equipping an integrated medical facility at Kuwait International Airport's Terminal 5 (T5) to check arrivals to Kuwait for coronavirus once flights resume. — KUNA

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 112 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). With the exception of four cases in critical condition, all cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while dozens have been discharged after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, nine people have 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 thousands of people, the overwhelming majority of them have returned from Iran. Meanwhile, Kuwait requires all expatriates who arrived from travel on February 27 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center at Hall

6 to test people for possible infection.

Precautions

Kuwait halted all commercial flights to and from the Gulf Arab state starting March 13 and until further notice, with the exception of cargo flights. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to March 26, with work resuming on March 29, while entities providing vitpPeople are banned from going to restaurants and cafes, including those inside malls until further notice. The government decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The government also allowed restaurants to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are lines, the distance must be at least one meter between people.

State departments have been on high alert to take precautions against the poten-

tial 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 March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staff); first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29. In the meantime, the Civil Service Commission suspended the biometric fingerprint system for staff attendance until further notice.

Visa suspension

Kuwait suspended issuing entry permits and visas unless those issued through diplomatic missions. Previously, 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 sus-

pended flights from Kuwait, whereas Saudi Arabia stopped issuing umrah visas for all nationalities as a precautionary measures. The Civil Service Commission directed all government agencies to bar employees placed under any form of quarantine from resuming work. The ban is applicable on Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti employees. Salary payments will continue as usual to all Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti employees under all kinds of compulsory quarantine.

Types of quarantine

All arrivals to Kuwait from Egypt, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Italy, Iran and Iraq are to be placed under quarantine for 14 days. Meanwhile, all arrivals to Kuwait International Airport coming from other countries must enter 14-day mandatory home self-quarantine.

Hotlines

- The Ministry of Health has set the fol-

lowing 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)

Local

Kuwait yet to decide on return of scholarship students, semester

Postponing the semester to the summer possible: Minister

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Dr Saud Al-Harbi said any decision to bring back the scholarship students or terminate the current semester at home depends primarily on the view of the Ministry of Health. Speaking at a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah at Seif Palace early morning yesterday, Harbi said the government has already developed a plan for evacuating the students from countries severely hit by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). "But the implementation of this plan depends on the evolving situation," he said, affirming that the government would not hesitate to enforce the plan if need be. The government attaches great importance to the safety of the scholarship students and the orderliness of the educational process, he said, noting that the Ministry of Education will resume schooling "only after making sure that there is no health hazards." The decision to suspend schooling is still in place and the Cabinet will decide on whether to extend the suspension after careful deliberations with the competent state bodies. "The Ministry of Health still has two weeks to work out its report on the matter and table it to the Cabinet," the minister went on.

Harbi noted that he met veteran educational experts, including incumbent and former senior officials of his ministry, to exchange views on how to address the current situation without jeopardizing the health of students. His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah

are keen on following up the conditions of the scholarship students abroad and the educational process at home, he stressed.

On the Kuwaiti students studying in the United States, Minister Harbi said the Kuwaiti Embassy in Washington and its cultural offices keep close watch on the evolving situation in the light of US measures to combat the outbreak of COVID-19 from the very beginning. He reminded the scholarship students in countries that suspended study at their colleges of the need to care for their health and stay. The government made available hotlines inside Kuwait for the families of scholarship students to contact with their children and get reassured about their safety, Harbi said, noting that his ministry is in constant contact with the ministries of foreign affairs and health as well as other state bodies on the situation of students abroad. He did not rule out the possibility of postponing the remaining part of the current semester to the summer holiday, saying, "exceptional conditions require exceptional responses."

Citizens abroad

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Sabah said that Kuwait's government, acting upon instructions of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, spares no effort to bring citizens back home following coronavirus spread. "Those are our sons and we will spare no efforts to bring them back to their home country once health authorities give the green light," Sheikh Ahmad

told the joint news conference. He said ministries of foreign affairs, health, higher education and defense were jointly responsible to bring back the Kuwaiti citizens. Sheikh Ahmad said 8,913 citizens contacted Kuwaiti embassies in the countries they were in to arrange their return. He urged those who did not call to do so. "We have short term plans and medium-term plans, and God willing we won't need long-term plans," said Sheikh Ahmad when asked about a plan to evacuate citizens from Arab and European countries, and the US. The foreign ministry, said the top diplomat, would provide citizens abroad with whatever they need.

Sheikh Ahmad urged all ministries and government authorities to abide by regulations of the Ministry of Health to contain the virus and stop its spread. "Kuwait is assessing the situation on how to contain this pandemic and stop it from spreading, and to avoid collapse of the health system just like what happened in countries with excellent health care," he said. Sheikh Ahmad called on people in Kuwait to abide by regulations issued by the health ministry, and said the government's decision aimed at protecting them. He said Kuwait was communicating with China, South Korea and Singapore to benefit from their experience in containing the virus. He added rumors would undermine the government's endeavors to fight the coronavirus.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Saturday called on all Kuwaiti citizens stranded abroad to contact the embassy in the country in which they are located in, or the emergency phones of the embassies located on the ministry's website www.mofa.gov.kw or the emergency phones of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 98007888 - 98007999 for inquiries regarding their conditions. — KUNA

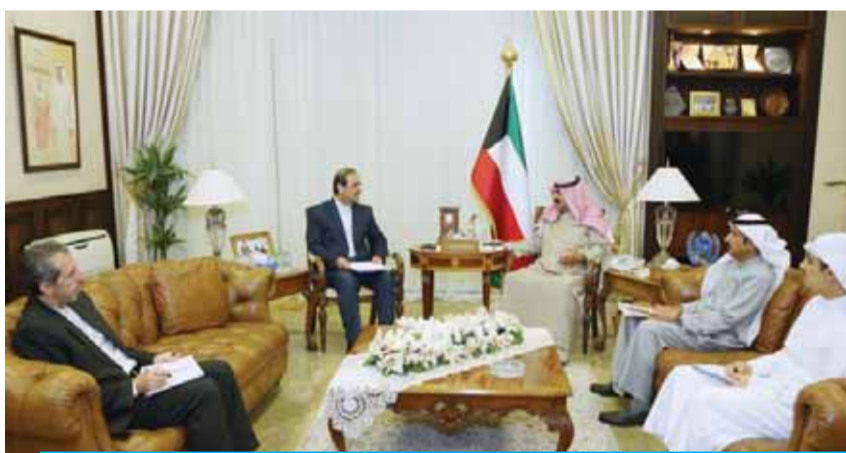


Effort to bring citizens home

Kuwaitis in UK urged to remain indoors

LONDON: Kuwait's Embassy in London called on citizens in Britain to always remain indoors and only leave in case of necessity. After the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration that coronavirus was a pandemic and spreading at a fast pace, the embassy said in a statement, "Everybody should take extreme caution and abide by instructions." Kuwaiti citizens in Britain, it added, should only leave their houses for necessary purposes, stay away from crowded places, refrain from using public transportation and follow hygiene instructions. It called on the citizens anew to contact the consular section at: 0207-5903-400 if they needed help. The number of deaths of the coronavirus in Britain amounted to 21, while 1,140 people were infected by the virus. The English Premier League suspended all matches up until early next month. Organizers of the London marathon postponed the event, originally scheduled for April 4, until next October. —UNA

Amir receives letter from Iran's president



KUWAIT: Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah meets with Iranian Ambassador to the State of Kuwait Mohammad Irani. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah yesterday held a meeting with Iranian Ambassador to the State of Kuwait Mohammad Irani, discussing bilateral relations. During the meeting, Ambassador Irani handed a letter to Jarallah: from President Hassan Rouhani to

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The two sides also pondered conditions on the regional and international arenas. Ambassador Ayham Al-Omar, the assistant foreign minister for the deputy minister bureau affairs, attended the meeting. —KUNA

Army camp transformed into quarantine



KUWAIT: The Ministry of Defense said yesterday it transformed its camp in Sabhan into a field hospital to be used as quarantine zone. Kuwait Army's Medical Services Authority also prepared the North Medical Complex in Al-Jahra area to be used for quarantine, the public relations department said in a statement. The authority forced a medical team jointly with the Ministry of Health to run the fully-equipped facilities, it said. The

authority also increased the number of rooms to be used for critical cases and quarantine in Sheikh Al-Ahmad Armed Forces Hospital. This is part of the army's contributions to state's efforts to address the spread of coronavirus. The ministry can also use the field hospital for medical checking of all officers who went to Italy, United States and other countries for training courses for possible contamination of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

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PM inspects expat check center, Khairan quarantine

KRCS commends measure to combat coronavirus spread



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah inspects the center for checking expatriates for coronavirus in Mishref. — KUNA photos



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah inspects the Khairan Resort quarantine.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah on Friday carried out an inspection tour at a center for checking expatriates for coronavirus in Mishref, as well as the Khairan Resort quarantine. Following the tour, His Highness the Prime Minister stressed His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's keenness to follow up on the health conditions of Kuwaiti citizens. Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled also stressed His Highness the Amir's much appreciation of all ongoing great efforts exerted by medical and security bodies and agencies in the country to contain coronavirus. His Highness the Prime Minister reassured citizens and residents that the State of Kuwait is pursuing all precautionary and preventive measures to put the coronavirus situation under control in line with relevant guidelines set by the World Health Organization (WHO). Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior totally dismissed social media claims that there would be

definite time for people to go outdoors and that violators would face fines. The minister cautioned in a press statement that it would take legal action against all rumormongers. It also called on mass media and social media to seek true information and news from official sources.

“ Amir lauds ongoing efforts ”

In the meantime, Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) Chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer commended the government's measures to combat spread of coronavirus, which aimed at preserving wellbeing of citizens and expatriates. Speaking on sidelines of His Highness the Prime Minister's visit to the coronavirus inspection center, Sayer praised the great government efforts at quarantine centers and provision of all medical facilities. Sayer said KRCS has volunteers at Khairan Resort, which was used as quarantine, in a drive to help the government teams do their job. He called on the public to follow preventive measures to confront the spread of COVID-19. —KUNA



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah speaks with KRCS Chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer during his inspection to the Khairan Resort quarantine.

Govt thanks public for cooperating in fighting COVID-19



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs an extraordinary Cabinet meeting on Saturday. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait's government commended Saturday understanding and awareness of citizens and expatriates for volunteering to help official authorities in their efforts to combat coronavirus. His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, who chaired an extraordinary cabinet meeting at Seif Palace, also expressed gratitude for medical and government workers in contributing to efforts to fight the virus, Deputy Premier and Minister of Interior Anas Al-Saleh said in a statement after the meeting. Saleh, also Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, said Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled voiced relief for the international recognition of measures adopted by the State of Kuwait in confronting the virus, also known as COVID-19.

The government, said Saleh, called on importance of abiding by regulations issued by the Ministry of Health to prevent spread of the virus. He praised understanding of citizens in heeding the regulations, and called on im-

portance of cancelling wedding receptions in order to prevent gathering of people. His Highness the Prime Minister, noted Saleh, thanked private companies for their initiatives that supported the government's anti-coronavirus efforts. Saleh cited that part of these efforts were suspension of public transportation, closure of arcades and children's entertainment centers, closure of shopping malls with exception of food stores, and closure of barber shops and women's salons.

Saleh said restaurants and coffee shops should not receive more than five customers at once, while people should leave at least one-meter distance among other persons when standing in queues. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Sabah told the meeting the ministry was ready to bring back Kuwaiti citizens once medical facilities in Kuwait were ready to receive them. — KUNA

Amir's directives to ensure public safety: Minister



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of the Interior, and Chairman of the Civil Defense Committee Anas Al-Saleh chairs a Civil Defense Committee meeting on Saturday. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Directives by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah to devote all capabilities was to secure and ensure the safety of all people in Kuwait in combating the coronavirus, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of the Interior, and Chairman of the Civil Defense Committee Anas Al-Saleh said. This came in a statement Saturday, following a meeting of the Civil Defense Committee to discuss the developments of the emerging coronavirus, in the presence of leaders of the Ministries of

Defense, Interior, National Guard, Education and other concerned authorities. Saleh stressed that His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, is closely following the developments of the health situation, moment by moment, and the strenuous efforts made by the ministries. Saleh urged citizens and residents to abide by the decisions of the extraordinary Cabinet meeting last Wednesday, which are primarily in their interest and aim mainly at their safety. — KUNA

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Local

KOC Hospital turns ward into COVID-19 quarantine

All operations continuing normally: Spokesman

KUWAIT: Kuwait Oil Company said Saturday KOC Hospital, also known as Al-Ahmadi Hospital, has designated a full ward as a quarantine for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) patients. The ward, with a 13-bed capacity, is put at the disposal of the Ministry of Health which can use it and increase its occupancy when need be, KOC Deputy CEO and Spokesman Qusai Al-Amer in a statement to the press. "It serves as a backup facility in case there is large number of infections exceeding the occupancy of Jaber Hospital. It is fully equipped and provided with the best human resources," he said, noting that the ward is ready to work around the clock. KOC has also provided the Ministry with a number of rooms at Al-Ahmadi guesthouse that could be used as compulsory quarantine for the Kuwaiti nationals who might be evacuated from countries severely hit with coronavirus outbreaks, Al-Amer pointed out. "The company has set an emergency plan for its Al-Ahmadi Hospital which boasts a great experience, highly qualified medical and nursing staff, and the world's latest medical equipment," he went on. He reaffirmed the company's commitment to contributing to the efforts spearheaded by the Ministry of Health to combat the spread of COVID-19, noting that the

company has adopted the necessary preventive measure since the emergence of the pandemic in Kuwait. "Shouldering its national and social responsibilities, KOC puts its health and logistic resources at the disposal of the state to overcome the current challenging conditions," he stressed.

Asked on the company's response to the Cabinet decision last Wednesday to shut down the state bodies from March 12 until March 26 to stem the spread of the pandemic, he said the company adapted to the decision in a way that hampered neither the oil production nor exportation. "The company continued operating its facilities with the minimum number of staff to ensure stable supplies to the power generating stations, and the local and foreign markets," Amer explained. He stressed the need of collective cooperation by everybody in the country to help overcome the current crisis.

"All operations are continuing normally and without any interruption," Amer said, adding that workers are doing their jobs in the fields according to the emergency plan set up by the company to ensure the continuity of work in these exceptional circumstances. He stated that KOC's higher management is directly following the needs of the workers, as the



KUWAIT: Kuwait Petroleum Corporation CEO Hashem Hashem and other officials tour a Kuwait Oil Company facility to check operations in light of the special measures Kuwait has taken to combat the spread of the coronavirus. —KUNA

Kuwait Petroleum Corporation CEO Hashem Hashem, together with the KOC CEO Emad Sultan and a number of deputy chief executives visited some of the company's facilities that included both oil installations in the north and west Kuwait. The spokesperson noted that the visit aimed to check on

the progress of work in the fields where the visiting delegation met workers there and commended its members for their commitment to do their work without interruption despite the challenges posed by the spread of the coronavirus and the strict measures taken at the country level. —KUNA



Senior management tours oil installations

local spotlight

Rumor of curfew



By Muna Al-Fuzai

Muna@kuwaittimes.net

Unfortunately these days, many rumors and fabricated stories are circulating on social media, especially on WhatsApp and Twitter. These lies may coincide with some people's thoughts, fantasies or even evil wishes. It's indeed annoying. Not all people are likely to seek the truth behind what they receive on their mobiles. Many people spread rumors, comment on them and resend them to others as a fact until the authorities step in to deny the matter.

Mostly, the rumors are false and contain misleading information. For example, recently there was a widespread rumor about the imposition of a curfew on people in Kuwait, and some people have also called for this publicly. I think this is dangerous, because it is a subject that touches the rights of people, their freedom of movement and their personal lives at a time when the authorities are making all efforts to direct people to avoid leaving the house except for necessities and needs.

The issue ended after a controversy on social media that led the government to deny its intention to impose a curfew on people, and only repeated that people should avoid crowding and gathering. The danger of the rumor is that it has misleading information, and it is one of the tools of psychological warfare in order to influence the psychological trends of people, their decisions and morale. It is an effective way to foment sedition, especially in a small community like Kuwait, because it depends on two elements - fear and desire.

I also believe that the rumor in Kuwait had a racist content against expatriates, which is really insulting, because the expatriates are here on work contracts and because there is someone who needs their services, so no one should use social media to insult others. Also, days ago, many people revolted against the gathering of expats by the beach on Twitter, and considered it a contempt of preventive measures against the spread of the virus and a challenge to the state, and demanded the deportation of these expats. But no one says explicitly that most expats live in very small apartments and do not have the luxury of large houses and gardens to enjoy sitting outdoors as they wish like Kuwaitis.

Going out with their family and children to parks or beaches is necessary for them, but many people used this to insult expatriates. They could've expressed their worries without insults. I also think that educating people to explain the harm of rumors in this period is extremely important, especially since we have a large number of uneducated laborers such as domestic workers and cleaners who need continuous guidance in their mother tongues.

I hope that the ministries of interior and health will intensify their activities by working to provide daily instructions in multiple Asian languages for these expats. I hope the government will provide specialists, writers and researchers to study ways to combat rumors in accordance to an accurate mechanism and objectives to navigate this crisis safely.

'Illegal' fish auction stopped

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Several fishermen attempted to hold an auction at Kout Market despite the current ban on fish auctions which authorities imposed as a precaution against the coronavirus (COVID-19) spread. Police and commerce ministry inspectors stepped in to stop the auction, and legal measures were taken against the fishermen.

Salmiya fight

Police received a call about a fight in Salmiya, so policemen went to the scene and found two bloodied Asians on the ground with abdomen wounds. Both were taken by paramedics to hospital as investigations are underway.

Car fire

Firemen from the Salmiya and Bidaa fire stations responded to a call about a car on fire inside the basement garage of a Salmiya building. The blaze was put out and no injuries were reported.

Smoke detectors

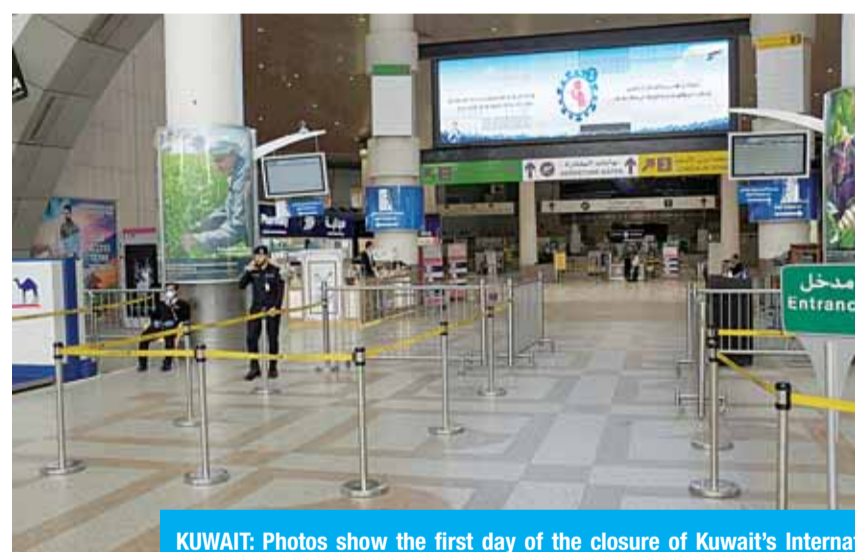
Kuwait Fire Service Directorate Director General Maj Gen Khalid Al-Mikrad received



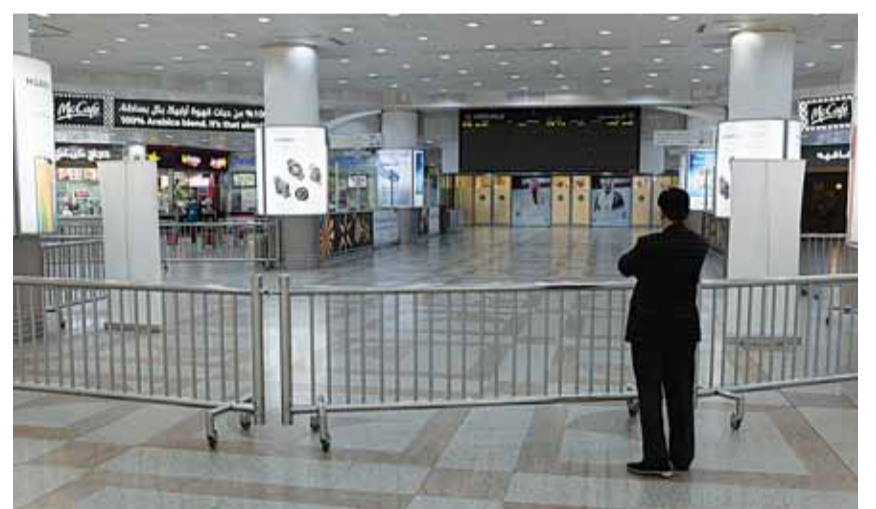
KUWAIT: Policemen stand next to a man bleeding following a fight reported in Salmiya.

the head of Cooperatives Union Meshal Al-Sayyar, accompanied by several members. They discussed the issue of supplying smoke detec-

tors to co-ops to be distributed to shareholders free or for a nominal sum to protect lives and property.



KUWAIT: Photos show the first day of the closure of Kuwait's International Airport. The airport closed to commercial flights at midnight on Friday. Flights for Kuwaiti citizens who want to return to the country are still running. —Photos by Mike Pope



KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality closed the Friday and birds' markets in Rai as Kuwait took strong measures to prevent gatherings in its fight against the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). —Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

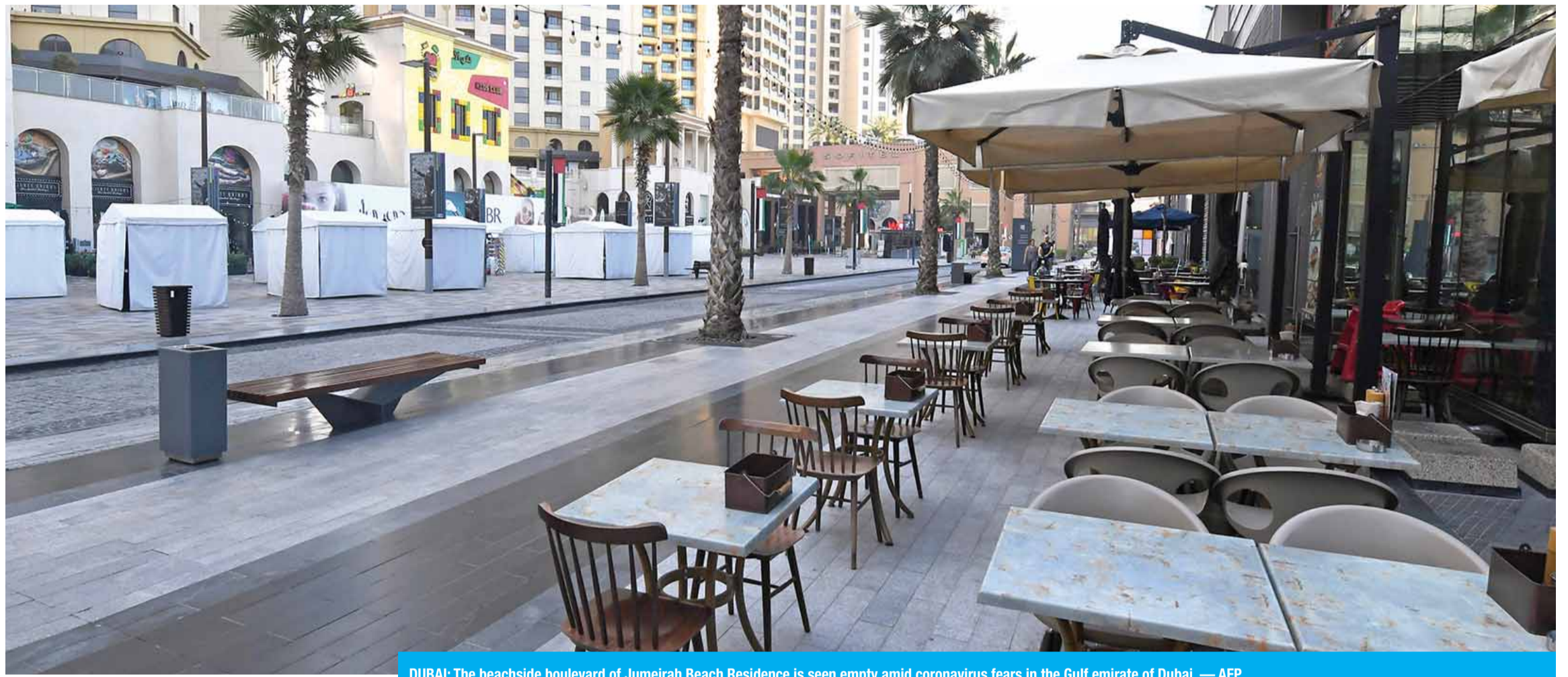


'Super-spreaders':
COVID-19 myth
or reality?

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Coronavirus is 'a punishment' for US, Europe



DUBAI: The beachside boulevard of Jumeirah Beach Residence is seen empty amid coronavirus fears in the Gulf emirate of Dubai. — AFP

Virus prompt lockdowns, self-isolation

France and Spain impose nationwide lockdowns

MADRID: France and Spain joined Italy in imposing lockdowns on tens of millions of people, Australia ordered self-isolation of arriving foreigners, and Argentina and El Salvador extended entry bans as the world sought to contain the spreading coronavirus. Panic buying in Australia, the United States and Britain saw leaders appeal for calm over the virus that has infected over 138,000 people globally and killed more than 5,000.

Several countries imposed bans on mass gathering, shuttered sporting, cultural and religious events, while medical experts urged people to practice "social distancing" to curb the spread. All of Pope Francis' Easter services next month will be held without the faithful attending, the Vatican said yesterday, in a step believed to be unprecedented in modern times.

The services, four days of major events from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday, usually draw tens of thousands of people to sites in Rome and in the Vatican.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said from yesterday international travelers arriving in the country would need to isolate themselves for 14 days, and foreign cruise ships would be banned for 30 days, given a rise in imported cases.

"What we've seen in recent weeks, is more countries

having issues with the virus and that means the source of some of those transmissions are coming from more and more countries," Morrison told a news conference. Australia's latest restrictions mirror those announced by neighboring New Zealand on Saturday. Australia has recorded more than 250 coronavirus cases and three deaths.

Travel bans, airline cutbacks

US President Donald Trump declared a national emergency on Friday. The United States has recorded more than 2,000 cases and 50 deaths, but has been criticized for slow testing. Travel bans and a plunge in global

air travel saw further airline cut backs, with American Airlines Inc planning to cut 75% of international flights through May 6 and ground nearly all its widebody fleet. The dramatic announcement by the largest US airline came hours after the White House said the United States would widen new travel restrictions on Europeans to include travelers in the United Kingdom and Ireland, starting today night.

Pope Francis' Easter services without faithful



Washington has already imposed flight restrictions on China. China tightened checks on international travelers arriving at Beijing airport after the number of imported new coronavirus infections surpassed locally transmitted cases for a second day in a row. Anyone arriving to Bei-

ling from abroad will be transferred directly to a central quarantine facility for 14 days for observation starting March 16, a city government official said.

China, where the epidemic began in December, appears to now face a greater threat of new infections from outside its borders as it continues to slow the spread of the virus domestically. China has reported 80,984 cases and 3,203 deaths, according to a Reuters tally, of which 66,911 have recovered in mainland China, which has imposed draconian containment policies, locking down several major cities.

Lockdowns, stay home

Spain put its 47 million inhabitants under partial lockdown on Saturday as part of a 15-day state of emergency to combat the epidemic in Europe's second worst-affected country after Italy. Spain had 193 coronavirus deaths and 6,250 cases, public broadcaster TVE said on Saturday, up from 120 deaths reported on Friday.

France shut shops, restaurants and entertainment facilities from yesterday with its 67 million people were told to stay home after confirmed infections doubled in 72 hours. French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said the government had no other option after the public health authority said 91 people had died in France and almost 4,500 were now infected.

"We must absolutely limit our movements," he said. Britain is preparing to ban mass gatherings, while isolating people aged over 70 for up to four months is part of its action plan to tackle coronavirus which will be implemented in the coming weeks, Health Secretary Matt Han-

cock said yesterday. Argentina banned entry to non-residents who have travelled to a country highly affected by coronavirus in the last 14 days, the government officially announced late on Saturday.

The ban will last 30 days. Argentina has 45 cases of coronavirus, the health ministry said, up from 21 on March 12. Panama said flights arriving from Europe and Asia would be temporarily suspended, with the exception of flights that transport doctors, medical equipment or other humanitarian aid. Colombia will expel four Europeans for violating compulsory quarantine protocols, just hours after it closed its border with Venezuela, the government said on Saturday.

Anti-terrorism tracking

Israel will use anti-terrorism tracking technology and partially shutdown its economy to minimize transmission risks, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Saturday. Cyber tech monitoring would be deployed to locate people who have been in contact with those carrying the virus, subject to cabinet approval, Netanyahu told a news conference in Jerusalem.

Starting yesterday, South Korea began to subject visitors from France, Germany, Britain, Spain and the Netherlands to stricter border checks, after imposing similar rules for China, Italy and Iran which have major outbreaks. Visitors from those countries now need to download an app which will report whether they have symptoms. South Korea has been testing hundreds of thousands of people and tracking potential carriers using cell phone and satellite technology. — Reuters

Coronavirus to deliver fresh hit to staggering media sector

WASHINGTON: The ailing US news industry is bracing for more turmoil with the coronavirus pandemic expected to deliver an economic shock to the sector - just when people need credible information the most. The impact is expected to be especially difficult for the newspaper sector, which has endured a decade where 2,000 publications have disappeared and newsroom jobs have fallen by half.



DUBLIN: A newspaper seller poses for a picture with a daily newspaper in the Grafton shopping area of Dublin, Ireland has announced the closure of all schools and colleges, and recommended the cancellation of mass gatherings as part of measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus. — AFP

News organizations are expected to take a hit from drops in advertising in an economic downturn, and could see declines in subscription revenue as readers pare expenses. Conferences and events that some organizations have used to supplement their incomes is also likely to disappear as long as the health emergency persists. "If you're ad supported and now heading into a period of short-term economic contraction that's

very bad for your business," said Gabriel Kahn, a journalism professor at the University of Southern California who follows industry economic trends.

"For smaller local players that's a direct hit they can't easily recover from." The free Seattle weekly The Stranger this week warned of an impending crisis and asked readers for donations, noting that "90 percent of our revenue - advertising, ticketing fees, and our own events - is directly tied to people getting together in groups. The coronavirus situation has virtually eliminated this income all at once."

Crisis highlights value

At the same time, the epidemic offers "an opportunity to turn the tide of the past few years" and rebuild trust with readers, University of Oregon journalism professor Damian Radcliffe said. "At a time of a national and international public health crisis, communities need reliable, informed journalism more than ever," Radcliffe said several news organizations have dropped paywalls as an effort to show "journalism as an act of public good." Kahn agreed that for many newsrooms, "this is the moment they can develop a connection with their audience and establish their value."

Joseph Lichterman, head of editorial and digital strategy at Lenfest Institute, which owns the Philadelphia Inquirer, said news organizations will face huge challenges in covering the crisis as well as an opportunity. "People tend to trust local media more than national media, so you want to have strong local news organizations," he said. But he added that news organizations are being pressed to expand coverage as the health crisis worsens, creating additional problems. "They have to deal with the logistics of keeping the business afloat and making sure their staff is safe," he said.

Some research has pointed to the importance of local media in dealing with an epidemic, among other public interest matters. A 2018 study by University of North Carolina researchers noted that trackers at the Centers for Disease Control rely on local news reports to monitor the spread of many diseases. "The CDC relies on the news stories in local papers to provide them with an early warning system, which is critical in containing the spread," the report said. — AFP

Unlike 2008, world economic doctors feud over cure

LONDON: "I think the patient is stabilized," then US president Barack Obama declared after G20 powers prescribed unprecedented remedies to steady the crisis-ravaged world economy just over a decade ago. Today, as the world fights to immunize global growth from the coronavirus pandemic and Obama's successor Donald Trump rips up the rulebook of cooperation, there has been no such collective response, and globalization itself is ailing.



NEW YORK: A view of Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital on 64th Street as the coronavirus continues to spread across the United States in New York City. — AFP

"Trump thinks all problems are external," Charlie Robertson, global chief economist with Renaissance Capital in London said. "He's always been of the view that if you can just maintain external security, you'll feel better about yourself, whether it's to do with trade or the virus," he said. "It does add to the anti-globalization story."

The outbreak risks exacerbating isolationist and populist trends already in evidence, after COVID-19 emerged in China late last year to infect much of the rest of the world. Trump, after pursuing a trade war with China, is

waging a blame game and blindsided Europeans by banning travel from the continent to ward off the "foreign" disease. Some countries in Europe are also shutting their borders. "Our experience is that primarily foreigners brought in the disease, and that it is spreading among foreigners," Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban said.

Globalization in sick ward

There is no scientific basis for such claims. But in concrete terms, the pandemic has exposed the reliance of many companies, from Apple to fashion chain Zara, on China as the world's foremost production hub. Trump's populist rhetoric and tariffs war were already forcing some companies, Apple included, to look at "reshoring" jobs back home or diversifying supplies.

The trend could deepen as the coronavirus strains or breaks supply chains centered on China, according to Vicky Redwood, senior economic adviser at Capital Economics. "Globalization has undermined the power of national governments and been blamed for rising inequality, multinational tax avoidance and unwanted migration," she said. "But business fundamentals are important too - for example, regardless of politics, companies have been waking up to the problems that long and complicated supply chains bring."

In the years since the financial crisis took hold in 2008, globalization as measured by trade flows and foreign direct investment has flatlined as a proportion of GDP, according to analysis by Capital Economics. Over the past decade, it has also started to make more business sense to have production closer to home as China becomes more expensive, thanks to rising wages and a shrinking workforce. "China's wealth level is 10 times higher per person and labor costs are vastly higher than they were 20 years ago," Robertson commented. "So you don't get the same cost benefit."

The 2008 banking crisis gave birth to G20 summits of nations including China to determine collective measures. "You've got a sick patient; I think we applied the right medicine," Obama said after a summit in London in April 2009 adopted far-reaching financial and trade responses. Fast-forward to earlier this month, when the more select group of G7 economies vowed to use "all appropriate policy tools" to protect world growth against the epidemic. Despite a lack of specifics, financial markets hoped that meant concerted action was coming. — AFP

International

Turkey quarantines pilgrims returning from Saudi Arabia

Ankara closed schools, halted flights, banned sports spectators

ISTANBUL: Thousands of Muslims returning to Turkey from a pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia were taken into quarantine yesterday due to concerns about the spread of the coronavirus, Turkish officials said. Television pictures showed buses transporting pilgrims along the highway from Ankara's airport to the city as part of an operation to place those returning into student dormitories. Turkey, which has only diagnosed six cases of coronavirus, has ramped up measures to halt its spread in recent days, closing schools and universities, holding sports events without spectators and halting flights to many countries.

On Wednesday it became the last major economy to report an outbreak after taking what the World Health Organization (WHO) described as "vigilant" measures to delay it. The latest move came after Health Minister Fahrettin Koca called overnight for those returning from the Umrah pilgrimage to quarantine themselves for a fortnight, saying a returnee in the last week had

become the sixth person to test positive.

He then announced yesterday that the state was actively quarantining the returnees. "All passengers returning from the Umrah since last night are being put into quarantine in separate rooms in student dormitories," he wrote on Twitter, adding that those suspected of being ill were being taken to hospital for tests. Earlier in March, Saudi Arabia expanded a rare freeze on pilgrimages to the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina by foreigners to also include Saudi citizens and residents due to concerns about coronavirus.

Umrah refers to pilgrimage rites carried out in the holy cities throughout the year, and is separate from the annual week-long haj, which typically draws 2 million Muslims from around the world. Haj starts this year in late July. The head of Turkey's religious directorate, Ali Erbas, said on Saturday that the last 5,300 Turkish pilgrims were in the process of returning to Turkey, but at the time he said the pilgrims should self-isolate at home for two weeks. — Reuters



Turkish Minister announces sixth coronavirus case

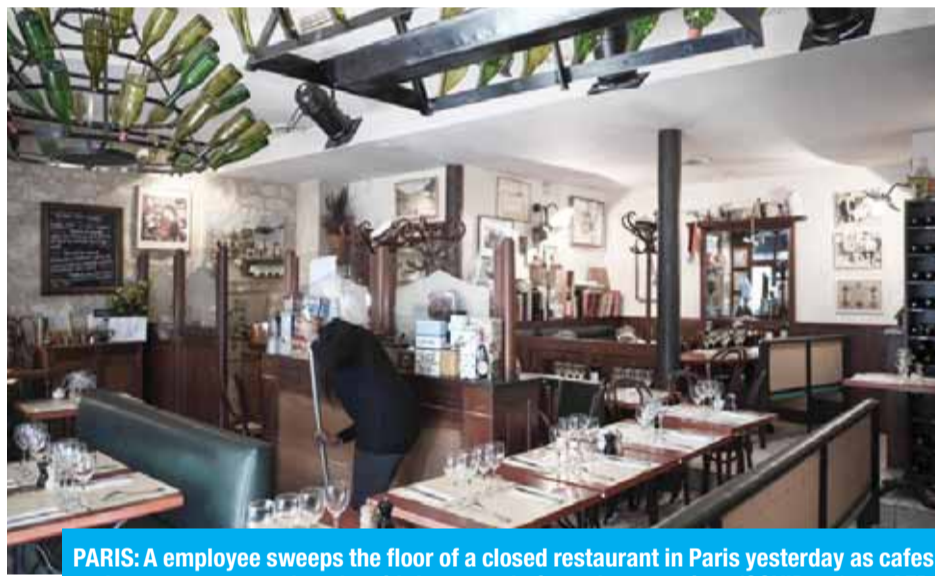
France cafes opened through the war, but not the coronavirus

PARIS: The Cafe de Flore, once the drinking hole of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, and the Brasserie Lipp continued serving customers during World War Two. But yesterday they locked their doors until further notice, as France upped its fight against the coronavirus. "At least during World War Two we knew what we were up against. Now we have no idea," said the Brasserie Lipp's head waiter, who used to listen to tales of German occupation recounted by colleagues at the 140-year-old Left Bank eatery.

Across the strangely quiet boutique-lined Boulevard Saint-Germain, Sophie Chardonnet watched an employee at the Cafe de Flore swing off his motorbike to collect his belongings before beginning a two-week period of temporary unemployment. Similar scenes of shuttered cafes, quiet streets and empty stores played out across the French capital after Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced restrictions on French public life unprecedented in living memory.

Restaurants, cafes, bars and cinemas would be closed indefinitely from yesterday, Philippe said. So too would libraries, shopping malls, and sports halls - any venue deemed non-essential. Food stores and gas stations would remain open. "It's sad to see these cafes closed, let's hope it won't be for too long," Chardonnet said. "I won't complain, however, it is for our own good."

The coronavirus has sickened some 4,500 people and killed 91 in France, which



PARIS: A employee sweeps the floor of a closed restaurant in Paris yesterday as cafes and restaurants are closed amid the spread of novel coronavirus (COVID-19). — AFP

followed neighboring Italy and Spain and other European nations in enforcing the severe measures. In Paris' central Marais area, home to the Jewish quarter, brands from US-based Michael Kors to France's Sessun had mounted signs telling customers to shop online. Catherine Perochon, whose falafel restaurant Chez Marianne serves a 1,000 dishes on a typical Sunday, was doing clearing up with staff, getting rid of perishables and switching off the gas, anticipating she would be shut for at least a month. "It was so last minute," she said of the prime minister's notice.

'Special times'

Others took a more defiant stand, at least while they could. In the upscale 16th arrondissement, some food and flower stall owners at a market in the Passy neighborhood made a spirited last stand. "It's just hard to throw all the merchandise away," said florist Laurent Binder, 41. "Some people are angry at us but others are coming in and

making last minute purchases."

Nearby, police pressed another stall owner to close within the hour. Queues formed outside butchers and bakers, with scant heed paid to the government's plea to people to stand one meter apart to minimize the risk of contagion. But in the most visited city in the world, tourists were in small numbers. The coronavirus outbreak has forced the closure of the Louvre museum, Eiffel Tower and Moulin Rouge cabaret bar.

On the Champs Elysees, usually thronged with tourists, there were fewer pedestrians than usual, though a steady stream of visitors took selfies in front of the Arc de Triomphe at the top of the boulevard. On the Trocadero esplanade facing the Eiffel Tower, unlicensed souvenir vendors tried to flog their wares to the small number of foreigners present. "What can you do? These are special times," said 26-year-old US tourist Laura. "I came from Belgium a week ago and was planning to go to Italy next. Good bye to that." — Reuters

Idlib: 'Forgotten city' targeted for revenge by Assad

IDLIB: At the heart of Syria's latest humanitarian crisis, locals call Idlib "the forgotten city", still paying the price for one day in the 1970s when the former president was pelted with tomatoes. The city and its surroundings have suffered furious bombardments since December at the hands of Syrian forces and Russian jets, leaving hundreds dead and forcing huge numbers to flee towards the Turkish border. With a tentative ceasefire announced on March 6, villager Malek Haj Khalil returned to his home in Sarmin, just east of Idlib, hoping to recover a few belongings from the ruins of his house.

But he found nothing beyond an air conditioning unit and a few broken pans among the twisted iron bars that were once his home. "We were hoping to find a few things, some furniture or blankets, but there is nothing," he said. Some neighbors had more success, and were loading gas cookers, mattresses and sofas on to trucks. "When the army came, it poured out all the hatred it has against us... targeting civilians and their houses," said Khalil.

Destroyed

Idlib was one of the first provinces to join the uprisings against President Bashar Al-Assad, and is now the last to remain in rebel hands, but the roots of that "hatred" predate the revolution in 2011. Tucked in the northwest of the country, Idlib's residents have long felt overlooked by their rulers in Damascus.

Locals and researchers particularly recall



AN NAYRAB: A man holding a flag of the Syrian opposition poses for a 'selfie' photo on a phone with another during protest blocking traffic on the M4 highway, which links the northern Syrian provinces of Aleppo and Latakia. — AFP

the time in the early 1970s when Hafez Al-Assad, Bashar's father who ruled from 1971 until his death in 2000, made his first and only visit to Idlib. An angry crowd pelted him with tomatoes and a shoe. "After that incident, Hafez al-Assad never returned to the city. It has since been cut off, and that shows in the quality of its infrastructure and schools," said Mohammad Sarmini, head of Syrian research centre Jusoor in Istanbul.

"It was this marginalization that pushed Idlib to join the revolution," he added. According to Taleb al-Dugheim, a specialist on Syrian history, the slight against Assad senior in Idlib "was never forgotten, and transformed into repression and marginalization" that continued under his son decades later. The regime also remembers Idlib's role in the protests of the 1980s, Dugheim said, when many supported a Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the city of Hama that was brutally suppressed.

'Not Syrians'

Asaad Falaha knows the hatred well. He leads a charity running a primary school in Binnish, east of Idlib city, that the regime has bombed three times during the recent offensive. "Seventy percent of it has been destroyed. To target a school like this shows the hatred of the regime," he said. The province shelters three million people - half of them displaced from other regions - and is partially run by Turkey-backed armed groups and a former Al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Assad has taken a close interest in the battle to retake it. "When Bashar Al-Assad visited the town of Al-Habit in Idlib province in October, he personally supervised artillery shelling against (the then rebel-held) Maaret Al-Numan," said Dugheim. "The regime acts as though the inhabitants of the Idlib are not really Syrians," he added. — AFP

Egypt shuts schools and universities

CAIRO: Egypt said it will close schools and universities for two weeks to prevent the spread of the coronavirus as the number of cases rises, reaching 110 on Saturday with two deaths. The suspension of classes from yesterday followed previously announced measures including the cancellation of large public gatherings, restrictions on the time allocated for mass prayers and the halting of local football league matches for two weeks.

"Because we found that the numbers have started rising as of late, we decided to take such precautionary measures from this point in time (to

prevent) the rapid spread that happened in other countries that delayed these kinds of decisions," Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly told a news conference as he announced the temporary closure of schools and universities. Egypt has also taken measures aimed at reassuring tourists that it is safe to visit the country after passengers contracted the coronavirus on a Nile river cruise ship.

Hundreds of tourists and tourism workers have been tested for the virus, and hotel facilities and cruise ships in Luxor and Aswan have been sanitized. President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi also called for a 100 billion Egyptian pound (\$6.38 billion) fund to finance a "comprehensive" state plan for tackling the outbreak, a statement by the presidency said, without giving details about the source of the funding. Egypt's health ministry said late on Saturday that the country had registered 17 new cases of the virus, bringing the total to 110. — Reuters

Nine years of conflict in Syria

BEIRUT: Syria's war, which began nine years ago, has involved many regional and international players, creating millions of refugees and displaced, while leaving more than 380,000 dead. Here is a summary of the main events in the conflict:

Revolt to repression

In March 2011, protests break out to demand political change after four decades of repressive rule by the Assad dynasty. President Bashar Al-Assad's regime cracks down on demonstrations but rallies continue. In July an army colonel who has defected from the military sets up the Turkey-based opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA). An armed rebellion erupts, with support from western and Arab countries. The rebels seize key territory, including large swathes of third city Homs and a chunk of Aleppo, the second city.

Air strikes

In 2012 regime forces step up their crackdown, carrying out bloody operations, notably in the central city of Hama, a bastion of opposition to the Assad regime. In July FSA fighters launch a battle for Damascus. The government keeps control of the capital, but rebels seize parts of the suburbs. From 2013 regime helicopters and planes unleash air strikes, some of them using barrel bombs, on rebel zones, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Hezbollah, Iran

The same year Iran-backed Lebanese Shiite militant group Hezbollah says it has deployed fighters to back Syrian government forces. Iran also boosts its support for Assad.

US steps back

On August 21, 2013, a chemical attack on two rebel-held areas near Damascus reportedly kill more than 1,400 people. The regime denies charges that it is responsible. US president Barack Obama at the last minute pulls back from threatened punitive strikes, instead agreeing a deal with Moscow that is meant to dismantle

Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

Islamic State group

In June 2014, the jihadist Islamic State group (IS) proclaims a "caliphate" over territory it has seized in Syria and Iraq. In September, a US-led coalition launches air strikes against IS in Syria. The strikes benefit Kurdish groups, which since 2013 have run autonomous administrations in Kurdish-majority areas. Kurds join with Arabs to form the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The alliance will go on to oust IS from key areas, including the jihadists' de facto capital Raqqa in 2017, and then in 2019, the group's last Syrian holdout in the village of Baghuz near the border with Iraq.

Russia rescues Assad

In September 2015, Syria's main ally Russia launches air strikes in support of Assad's beleaguered troops, a turning point in the war. In a string of deadly campaigns, the regime retakes key rebel bastions, from Aleppo in 2016 to Eastern Ghouta in 2018.

Chemical attacks

In April 2017, a sarin gas attack on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhun kills more than 80 people. US President Donald Trump unleashes missile strikes against the regime's Shayrat airbase. In April 2018, the US, with the support of France and Britain, launches retaliatory strikes after an alleged regime chemical attack on the then rebel-held town of Douma, near Damascus.

Turkish offensive against Kurds

On October 9, 2019, Ankara launches an offensive targeting Kurdish forces in Syria, whom it brands "terrorists" linked to Kurdish insurgents in Turkey. The operation follows Washington's announcement that US forces would withdraw from the border areas between Turkey and Syria. The operation allows Turkey to retake control of a 120-kilometre-long, 30-kilometre-wide strip of territory along its border with Syria.

Battle for Idlib

In December 2019, the regime launches a deadly offensive in north-western Syria to retake the country's last major jihadist bastion of Idlib. The violence has provoked a humanitarian crisis, with nearly one million people displaced and Turkey suffering heavy losses in clashes with regime forces. — AFP

International

Muslims still feel unsafe a year after massacre in New Zealand

Muslim women who wear headscarves on target

CHRISTCHURCH: Aliya Danzeisen rises before dawn every day to hear the news so she can prepare her school-age daughters for any harassment they may face for being Muslim. "We don't feel any safer," the Muslim community leader says, reflecting on the 12 months since the Christchurch mosque attacks, in which a self-declared white supremacist killed 51 Muslims at Friday prayers.

The abuse experienced prior to the attacks on March 15 last year died down immediately after the killings, Danzeisen said, adding: "It felt the entire New Zealand population was rallying behind us." But she says it is now on the rise again, a year on from the killings that rattled the normally peaceful South Pacific nation, with unease among the Muslim community amid ongoing vitriol and threats.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern—who received widespread praise for her handling of the aftermath of the massacre—admitted Friday there was "much more" her country could do to tackle white supremacists. Anjum Rahman, co-founder of the Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand said there was an "undercurrent or rhetoric of hate... it isn't just our community, we see it a lot in online hate (towards) the transgender community. 'I wouldn't say it's specifically just us, but we're feeling it.'"

Muslim women who wear headscarves were targeted "because they think we're vulnerable and can't fight back", she said. Following the massacre at two mosques in the South Island city, New Zealand's gov-

ernment moved swiftly. Gun laws were tightened, Ardern launched a global campaign to have terrorist and extremist content removed online, and a judicial inquiry was established to investigate what could have been done to prevent the attacks.

Danzeisen, a former corporate lawyer in the United States who moved to New Zealand 14 years ago, said she believes the support shown to Muslims in the immediate aftermath of the shooting "surprised those in the fringe supremacist movements". "As a result it's made them more defensive and more vitriolic, they've become louder," she said.

Poison threat

In a recent threat to the Islamic Women's Council "they told us that they knew what we were doing, who we were, who we were meeting with and they were watching us and there was a mention of poisoning". Danzeisen said she felt it was important to brief her high school-age daughters about global incidents so they could handle any intimidation. "I did that for years, so they could go to school and be prepared, to be able to explain to peers or teachers when there is an international issue to explain why in their response. I am aware of children being harassed both by peers but also educators."

The impact spreads beyond New Zealand. At the Al Noor mosque Jabara Akhter Juti said her family in Bangladesh remain "very concerned about me" since she moved to Christchurch last year with her husband. The imam at Al Noor, Gamal Fouda, wanted the broader impact of extremism addressed and not just



CHRISTCHURCH: Members of the Muslim community Jood Almutairi (right), Alaa Fouda (center) and Nada Fouda leave after attending congregational prayers, two days ahead of the first anniversary of the Christchurch mosque shootings, at Horncastle Arena in Christchurch. — AFP

confined to Muslims. "That was a war against New Zealand, not only against Muslims, because today it is against one group tomorrow against another group, people of other ethnic backgrounds are targeted," he said.

Mosque spokesman Tony Green said a recent incident in Auckland where a Chinese doctor was abused in public because of coronavirus highlighted

the problem. "I don't know if she was born in New Zealand but she's been here for a very long time and she had people shouting at her 'go back to China'. 'This is part of a much wider issue and I think people need to come to terms with it.' 'It's global issue, it affects communities all across the world.' The inquiry into the mosque shootings is due to report back at the end of April.— AFP



Imam wants the broader impact of extremism addressed

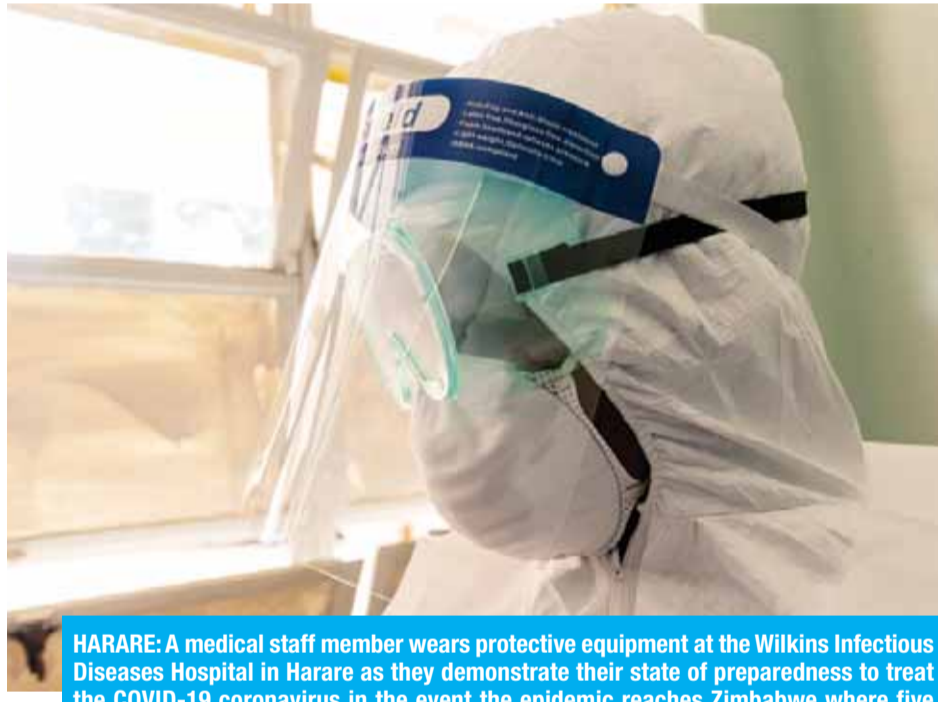
Coronavirus is 'a punishment' for US, Europe

HARARE: Zimbabwe's defense minister has called the coronavirus pandemic a "punishment" of the US and Europe for imposing sanctions against members of the ruling regime over human rights abuses. Coronavirus has infected more than 150,000 people worldwide and killed almost 6,000 since it was first detected in China last December.

"Coronavirus is the work of god punishing countries who imposed sanctions on us," said Zimbabwe's defense minister Oppah Muchinguri on Saturday, speaking at a rally in the northern town of Chinhoyi. "They are now staying indoors. Their economies are screaming just like they did to our economy."

The United States and the European Union first imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe during the despotic rule of the country's late ex-president Robert Mugabe, ousted by the military in November 2017. The measures were aimed at high-ranking officials and government institutions, including travel bans on Mugabe and his inner circle. President Emmerson Mnangagwa has been battling to re-engage with the West since he took office in 2017.

But the US extended sanctions this month to two security officials accused of orchestrating a violent crackdown on protests over a delay in election results in 2018, killing six. Muchinguri said the novel virus would teach US President Donald



HARARE: A medical staff member wears protective equipment at the Wilkins Infectious Diseases Hospital in Harare as they demonstrate their state of preparedness to treat the COVID-19 coronavirus in the event the epidemic reaches Zimbabwe where five suspected cases have tested negative. — AFP

Trump that "he is not God". "They must feel the effects of coronavirus and understand our pain," she said. Trump declared a national state of emergency on Saturday. At least 2,700 people have tested positive in the US and more than 50 have died.

Sub-Saharan Africa has so far escaped the worst of the pandemic, with fewer than 100 cases confirmed in more than 20 countries. Zimbabwe has not yet detected any cases. Neighboring South Africa announced 13 new cases on Sunday, bringing the country's tally up to 51. On Twitter, many Zimbabweans said they were appalled by

Muchinguri's words. "To say I'm gobs-macked is an understatement," tweeted law professor Alex Magaisa. "How does a senior minister utter such rubbish?"

Others criticized the government for not taking the pandemic seriously enough. "Namibian President... has cancelled Independence Celebrations," tweeted journalist Hopewell Chin'ono. "Yet in Zimbabwe the regime is pushing ahead with Independence celebrations... whilst hospitals are dilapidated!" To date only government officials and staff have been banned from foreign travel in Zimbabwe. — AFP

Hindu group touts cow urine elixir for coronavirus

NEW DELHI: Dozens of Hindu activists held a cow urine party in the Indian capital Saturday to protect themselves from the new coronavirus, as countries around the world struggle to control the deadly pandemic. Members and supporters of All India Hindu Mahasabha staged fire rituals and drank from earthen cups to fight COVID-19 at the gathering in New Delhi dubbed a "gaumutra (cow urine) party".

Many in the Hindu-majority nation of 1.3 billion consider cows sacred and in recent years have made several assertions about the liquid being an elixir, claims that critics have rejected as quackery. "Whoever drinks cow urine will be cured and protected," Hari Shankar Kumar, one of the volunteers at the event, told AFP as he served the "remedy" in brown clay cups.

Governments and scientists have said no medicine or vaccine is available to protect or cure people of the infection that has killed more than 5,400 people and infected nearly 150,000 across six continents. Two people have died in India while more than 80 have fallen ill, and the government has ordered the closure of some land routes into the country and cancelled all visas to stop the spread of the virus in the world's second



NEW DELHI: Hindu organization Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha president Chakrapani Maharaj (second right) poses along with members and supporters holding cups as they attend a 'gaumutra (cow urine) party' to fight against the spread of the coronavirus on Saturday. — AFP

most populous country.

Members draped in saffron clothes chanted Hindu hymns at the fire ritual as devotees sang paens for the sacred animal. "We have gathered here and prayed for world peace and we will make an offering to the corona (virus) to calm it," Chakrapani Maharaj, the group's leader, told reporters before gulping down a cup of urine. He then offered a glass to a devil-shaped caricature of the virus to "pacify" it.

He urged people to adopt the "tried and tested" practice of drinking cow urine to

ward off diseases, and desist from killing animals and eating meat. "The coronavirus is also a bacteria (virus) and cow urine is effective against all forms of bacteria that harm us," claimed Om Prakash, a participant from the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh. Some members of Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party have also claimed cow urine has medicinal qualities and can even cure cancer. One legislator from the party last week suggested use of the urine as well as cow dung can cure the coronavirus. — AFP

COVID-19 myth or reality?

PARIS: Can a single COVID-19 patient infect dozens of others? Although transmission rates in the current outbreak appear to be far lower, a variety of factors can lead to an individual infecting many. The concept of so-called "super-spreaders" - patients who typically infect far more people than the standard transmission rates - emerged in previous outbreaks of diseases such as Sars and Mers. Amesh Adalja, an expert in emerging infectious diseases at John Hopkins University, said the term was not scientific and there was no set quantity of transmissions that would define a super-spreader.

"But, in general, it is usually a markedly higher figure when compared to that of other individuals," he said. A range of variables govern how many people an individual infects, from how fast they shed the virus to how many people they come in to close contact with. The novel coronavirus has a typical transmission rate of 2-3 - that is, every confirmed case appears to infect between 2 and 3 other people on average. But the pandemic has thrown up at least two patients who appear to have been super-spreaders.

Suspected super-spreaders

One suspected super-spreader, a British national, appears to have infected a dozen others when he returned from Singapore and then went skiing in the Alps. He recovered, but may have infected another five people after returning home. In South Korea, which has the second highest number of COVID-19 cases outside of Italy, a woman known as Patient 31 appears to have infected dozens of others.

But in an ever better-connected world, it can be challenging to definitively link transmissions to an individual patient. "It's possible that what we call super-spreaders exist, those patients

who don't only infect 2-3 others but could infect dozens," said Eric Caumes, head of infectious and tropical diseases at Paris' Pitie-Salpetriere Hospital. "The problem is we aren't spotting them."

According to Olivier Bouchaud, head of infectious diseases at that Avicenne hospital in Paris' suburbs, variable transmission rates could be down to how fast a patient sheds the virus once infected. "That's just a hypothesis at this point," he said. "Obviously we don't have a clear explanation, and there's nothing specific to COVID-19." Another unknown is the role played by young children, who are less severely affected by the virus but are capable of transmitting it - part of the reason many countries have moved to close schools in recent days.

'Highly variable'

Cristl Donnelly, professor of Applied Statistics at the University of Oxford, said all disease transmission was by nature "highly variable". "But we are not all the same, we vary in our immune systems, in our behavior, and in where we happen to be," she said. "All of these things can affect how many people we would transmit to." Bharat Pankhania, an infectious diseases expert at Britain's Exeter University, even disputed whether super-spreaders existed.

He said that the biggest factors determining transmission were environmental, made worse in dense-populated cities. "These circumstances often are: crowding; a confined space with poor ventilation; poor infection control, meaning lots of non-porous, hard surfaces which can keep a virus viable for a longer time; a favorable ambient humidity; and the infected person usually being in the early phase of their illness, when virus secretions are at their peak," he said.

It's due to these contributing factors that many experts are reluctant to talk in terms of super-spreaders. Added to this, as France's health minister has pointed out, the term might be used to stigmatize individuals, when it is likely they transmitted COVID-19 without realizing. — AFP

Israel tries to untangle political knot

JERUSALEM: Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday proposed a six-month "emergency government" to confront the coronavirus crisis and end a political deadlock after the country's third inconclusive election in less than a year. With Netanyahu facing criminal charges in three corruption cases - his trial was supposed to start on Tuesday - political rivals quickly cast dispersions on his motives.

The right-wing Likud party leader made the offer to his main political challenger, former armed forces chief Benny Gantz of the centrist Blue and White party, as Israel's president was poised to choose a candidate this week

to try to put together a governing coalition. Neither Likud nor Blue and White won enough seats in parliament in the March 2 election to secure a ruling majority on their own, or with the support of potential coalition partners.

Netanyahu said on Twitter that a "national emergency government... led by me" would - unlike Israel's current caretaker administration - be able to pass a budget and make "difficult decisions" in the face of an "international and a national crisis". Israel's longest-serving leader also proposed that as an alternative to a six-month government, he and Gantz could join forces in a four-year "unity" administration. Under that blueprint, Netanyahu would be prime minister for the first two years, and Gantz would then take over. Gantz signaled he was open to a unity government but cast doubt on Netanyahu's true intentions. Were Netanyahu sincere in his offer he would send a negotiating team to Blue and White rather than make proposals via social media, Gantz tweeted. — Reuters

Business

MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2020

10 Kamco Invest reports KD 3.0m net profit in 2019



11 Oil price drops 50% from year's peak as OPEC+ coalition collapses



11 Staying safe, and sane, as Silicon Valley locks down



DUBAI: A trader walks by beneath a stock display board at the Dubai Stock Exchange in the United Arab Emirates. The central banks of the UAE and Saudi Arabia on Saturday announced stimulus plans worth a combined \$40 billion to ease the impact of the coronavirus outbreak in their respective countries. —AFP

UAE, Saudi central banks roll out \$40bn stimulus

Countries to face wider fiscal deficits amid dropping oil prices, coronavirus

DUBAI/RIYADH: The central banks of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, the two largest Arab economies, on Saturday announced stimulus plans worth a combined \$40 billion to ease the impact of the coronavirus outbreak in their respective countries.

The UAE regulator plans to support banks and businesses in the country, where the outbreak is affecting major economic sectors such as tourism and transport, with a 100 billion dirham (\$27 billion) economic plan, it said on Saturday.

In a separate statement, the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority said it had prepared a 50 billion riyal (\$13.32 billion) package to help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) cope with the economic impacts of coronavirus. The disease has so far infected 85 people in the UAE and 105 in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi funding aims to grant SMEs six-month deferrals on bank payments, concessional financing and exemptions from the costs of a loan guarantee program,

SAMA said. Concerts, sporting events and industry conferences have been cancelled or postponed in the past few weeks in the UAE to contain the spreading of the new coronavirus. In Dubai, the Middle East's trade, finance, tourism and transportation hub, some businesses have started to feel the pain from the global travel slowdown caused by the outbreak.

Saudi Arabia, which has already suspended the Umrah pilgrimage and locked down its eastern Qatif region where many infections are located, halted all international flights for two weeks from yesterday.

The UAE central bank said it will provide 50 billion dirhams through collateralized loans at zero cost to all banks operating in the UAE while an additional 50 billion dirhams will be freed up from lenders' capital buffers. "The CBUAE is allowing banks to free-up their regulatory capital buffers to boost lending capacity and support the UAE economy," it said in a statement.

It said the scheme offers banks relief for up to six

months from the payments of principal and interest on outstanding loans for affected private sector companies and retail customers.

Committed to peg

Adding to a likely economic slowdown caused by the virus, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also expected to face wider fiscal deficits this year because of lower oil prices, due to an oil price war between Riyadh and Moscow. The Gulf states' currencies, which are pegged to the US dollar, weakened in the forwards market last week.

The UAE regulator said on Saturday it maintained its commitment to the peg for the dirham, and said foreign currency reserves amounting to 405 billion dirhams as of March 10 were "adequate" to safeguard the stability of the currency.

Other measures introduced by the UAE central bank on Saturday include reducing by 15-25 percent the

amount of capital banks have to hold for loans to SMEs, and better terms for first-time home buyers. Importantly for the local real estate sector - which has been struggling in Dubai for the past decade - banks will be allowed to increase their exposure to real estate loans.

"When the exposure reaches 20 percent of the banks' loan portfolio (measured by risk-weighted assets), banks will be allowed to increase it to 30 percent, but will be required to hold more capital," it said. The central bank also introduced regulations which reduce banking fees for small companies.

The Dubai and Abu Dhabi stock exchange indices dropped last week amid coronavirus concerns and because of tumbling oil prices. To contain volatility in the markets, the central bank said it plans to issue guidelines on margin calls, asking banks to request additional collateral before liquidating stocks in the event of a market downfall. —Reuters

Aramco 2019 profit slides 20.6% on lower crude prices

RIYADH: Saudi Aramco reported yesterday a 20.6 percent drop in 2019 net profit due to lower crude prices and production levels, in its first earnings announcement as a listed company amid an escalating price war. The world's most valuable firm also announced it was slashing its capital expenditure for this year, as the price war with Russia and the spreading coronavirus pandemic rattle energy markets. These are the first financial results after Aramco's historic \$29.4 billion initial public offering and listing on the domestic Tadawul exchange last December. Last week, Aramco shares slipped below the IPO price for the first time. "Net income was \$88.2 billion for the full-year 2019, compared to \$111.1 billion in 2018," Aramco said in a statement.

"The decrease was primarily due to lower crude oil prices and production volumes, coupled with declining refining and chemical margins." The company also declared \$1.6 billion of impairment provisions for losses associated with Sadara Chemical Company, an Aramco subsidiary. Despite a drop in earnings, Aramco said it distributed a dividend of \$73.2 billion in 2019. Based on its commitment under the IPO it intends to declare an annual dividend of \$75 billion in 2020, it added.

"2019 was an exceptional year for Saudi Aramco. Through a variety of circumstances-some planned and some not-the world was offered unprecedented insight into Saudi Aramco's agility and resilience," CEO Amin

Nasser said in the statement. The company is bracing for financial pain as the coronavirus outbreak saps global demand for crude and the ongoing price war between Riyadh and Moscow sends oil markets into a tailspin. Nasser said the company had taken steps to "rationalize" its planned 2020 capital spending.

Aramco's capital spending last year dropped to \$32.8 billion from \$35.1 billion in 2018, the statement said. It expects capital spending, which includes expenditure on projects, to be between \$25 billion and \$30 billion this year "in light of current market conditions and recent commodity price volatility". "The recent COVID-19 outbreak and its rapid spread illustrate the importance of agility and adaptability in an ever-changing global landscape," Nasser said.

Shock-and-awe

The price war, likely to weaken Aramco's 2020 first quarter earnings, was triggered by Russia's refusal to agree on additional output cuts to support prices dented by the coronavirus outbreak. An apparently furious Riyadh responded with a massive production hike and the biggest cuts to prices in two decades, moving to snatch some of Russia's market share and triggering market turmoil. The kingdom said last week Aramco will pump 12.3 million barrels of oil per day, boosting output by at least 2.5 million bpd. It also announced plans to raise production capacity from 12 million bpd to 13 million bpd. "The real question everyone wants to know is what's happening in Q1 2020," said Ellen Wald, author of the book "Saudi Inc.". "The... insight won't arrive until the next earnings call when we learn how Aramco dealt with the current oil market drama and Saudi politics."

Riyadh's shock and awe strategy has wide-reaching consequences for global oil producers, already reeling



In this file photo, visitors stop at the Aramco exhibition section at the Misk Global Forum on innovation and technology held in the Saudi capital Riyadh. —AFP

from a slump in demand. In its latest monthly report, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries lowered its forecast for global average daily demand by 0.92 million barrels to 99.73 million barrels. Saudi Arabia also raised political uncertainty after a royal purge that saw King Salman's brother and nephew detained. Sources said they were accused of plotting a palace coup to unseat the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, heir to the Saudi throne and de facto ruler.

Aramco shares rallied immediately after the listing on December 11, rising by 19 percent to 38 riyals (\$10.1) and temporarily lifting the company's valuation above the \$2 trillion mark, which was sought by the crown prince. But as oil prices tumble, Aramco shares have lost 29 percent from its highest point, slipping below the listing price. On Thursday, Aramco's market value dropped to around \$1.55 trillion, but it still remains the world's largest publicly listed company. —AFP

Boursa Kuwait modifies Security Circuit Breaker

KUWAIT: Following approval by the Capital Markets Authority (CMA), Boursa Kuwait announced on its official website and social media channels that effective from 15 March, 2020, the security circuit breaker will be modified by reducing the lower limit from -10 percent to -5 percent, while maintaining the upper limit at 10 percent.

This decision has been made in an effort to address the fast-paced changes and turbulence facing the local exchange market, as well as regional and international exchanges, as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. It also follows the major drop in oil prices globally, which has led to a state of extreme volatility of listed shares prices and halted market trading in Boursa Kuwait.

Boursa Kuwait has rolled out the reduction in the security circuit breaker, in compliance with its Rulebook, which allows it to intervene in such challenging conditions and take the necessary action to ensure the protection of all dealers and minimize any negative impacts. In the event a drop or increase occurs for any security, the modification allows dealers to enter buy or sell orders after pausing the security for a time frame of two minutes. During these two minutes, an auction takes place to define the new reference price, while giving priority to orders based on the current operating system. The number of shares entered in the auction must comply to the Normal Market Size (NMS) specified, in proportion to the daily average trading.

Business

Kamco Invest reports KD 3.0m net profit in 2019, proposes cash dividends of 5 fils

Fee income reaches KD 19.1 million representing 71.1% of total revenues

KUWAIT: Kamco Invest, a regional non-banking financial powerhouse with one of the largest AUMs in the region, announced its financial results for the full year ending 31 December 2019 reporting a net profit of KD 3.0 million (Kuwaiti fils 12.47 per share) compared to KD 2.6 million (Kuwaiti fils 10.77 per share) for the same period in 2018. Fee income reached KD 19.1 million representing 71.1 percent of the total revenues which stood at KD26.9 million.

2019 was full of events and achievements on corporate and business sector levels. On the corporate level, completion of the legal procedures of the merger with its subsidiary Global Investment House was a major milestone to become one of the largest, strongest, and a more competitive player in the regional investment services sector namely asset management, investment banking and brokerage. On 12th of December 2019 the company successfully completed the legal merger and share swap and by year end introduced its new identity "Kamco Invest".

On the operational level, the teams worked hard to align operations leveraging on synergies, competencies and offerings and at the same time continued providing exclusive services to clients, winning mandates and reporting competitive returns on managed products.

The Company's assets under management stood at

\$13.5 billion invested through funds and portfolios in various asset classes, strategies and jurisdictions. The company was ranked the fifth largest asset manager in the GCC region by Moody's in their asset management report issued in September 2019.

During the year, Asset Management was recognized for the performance of its managed equity funds. Three equity funds managed by the company were ranked amongst the top performing equity funds in the Kuwaiti market. Kamco Premier Market Index Fund was the best performing equity fund in Kuwait reporting 35.1 percent and Al-Durra Islamic Fund the best performing Sharia compliant equity fund in Kuwait reporting 22.4 percent. The team has also increased the number of portfolios under management while enhancing our current products to offer clients a wider range of investment solutions that best suit their risk appetite.

The Real Estate Investments team has successfully acquired two properties in the US for a total amount of \$262.3 million and completed a successful exit in the United Kingdom generating an IRR for clients of 10.53 percent. The team has successfully distributed an average annualized income of 7.8 percent on the managed assets since inception.

Special Situations Asset Management, a tailored

"wind-down" asset management service offered to clients seeking value enhancement and optimal realization of difficult assets portfolio covering multi asset classes with focus on the MENA region, has successfully executed the portfolios' strategies and resulted in generating cash inflows of \$739 million since its inception in 2013, \$273 million in 2019. During the year, the team successfully unwound a \$40 million portfolio, awarded in June 2015, as per agreed target asset values with the client.

On the Investment Banking side, Kamco Invest successfully completed 10 investment banking mandates amounting to \$1.6 billion and raising the total successful mandates to \$22.3 billion since inception. The company has successfully managed the IPO of Boursa Kuwait Securities Company ("Boursa Kuwait"), the second phase of the privatization process. The team is currently working on several interesting mandates.

Oula Wasata, the brokerage arm of Kamco Invest, continued executing its strategy to focus on institutional clients and has resulted in gaining market share.

The board of directors have proposed to the approval of the general assembly a 5 percent cash dividend (5 fils per share) for distribution to the



Faisal M Sarkhou

shareholders. Commenting on the results, Faisal Mansour Sarkhou, CEO of Kamco Invest, said, "2019 was an exceptional year and a key phase in the history of Kamco Invest with the successful completion of the merger. We look forward to continue creating value to our shareholders and further enhance our offerings with solutions that can protect and grow clients' wealth even in challenging, uncertain and volatile economic environments."

Crisis-fighter Bailey returns to BoE as virus storm hits

LONDON: Andrew Bailey will go straight back into crisis mode when he returns to the Bank of England as its new governor today, this time facing the threat of a global recession caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Bailey was central to Britain's prevention of a meltdown in its banking system during the global financial crisis of 2007-09, when he was a top BoE official.

A few years later, he was a key player in Britain's response to the Greek debt crisis which threatened to plunge the City of London back into chaos. Now the 60-year-old, who spent 30 years at the BoE before leaving to run a finance regulator in 2016, is about to be tested again.

On Wednesday, in Mark Carney's parting shot as governor, the BoE launched emergency credit measures to prevent a wave of corporate bankruptcies, and it cut interest rates to 0.25%.

The move was part of a twin-tracked stimulus push along with the finance ministry which unveiled Britain's biggest public spending budget since 1992. But investors expect Bailey will have to lead the BoE into further action right at the start of his eight-year term.

Challenged by lawmakers earlier this month about whether he was nimble enough for the job at such a critical time, Bailey recalled the drama of a decade ago. "We had to do things in short order during that period which were pretty unprecedented, absolutely unprecedented in the history of certainly the Bank, and we had to do them at short notice," he said.

At one point last week, investors were fully pricing in another rate cut to an all-time low of just above zero on March 26, at the end of the BoE's first monetary policy meeting under its new governor.

Those bets faded on Friday but the BoE is expected to scale up its 435 billion-pound bond-buying program, possibly as soon as this month. That could help the government sell even more debt to increase its already giant spending plans. "Looser fiscal policy and coordination with monetary policy is likely here to stay and will increase the effectiveness of both sets of tools," Benjamin Nabarro, an economist with US bank Citi, said in a note to clients.

"However, significant easing will also likely increase the dependence on the 'kindness of strangers' of an economy with large and persistent current account deficits."

So far, record-low borrowing costs suggest few concerns among investors about buying British debt.

Joint action

Philip Shaw, an economist with Investec, said the joint policy action between the government and the BoE contrasted with a less coherent response by policymakers in the eurozone. But deeper coordination with the government might raise questions about the BoE's independence.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has stamped his mark on Britain's political institutions since his big election win in December. Sajid Javid, who appointed Bailey in December, quit as finance minister last month after a row with his boss. But any attempt to put political pressure on the central bank - as tried by US President Donald Trump with the Federal Reserve - could put the BoE's credibility at risk.

"Policy co-ordination is good when the various parties concur on what needs to be done," Shaw said. "It's when policy disagreements occur that issues such as central bank independence come into play. But we are not there at the moment." The main criticism of Bailey's time as chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority is that he was not tough enough on wrong-doing by bankers.

He came under fire from lawmakers in 2018 for firing Barclays chief executive Jes Staley 1.1 million pounds (\$1.35 million) rather than taking tougher action after Staley tried to identify a whistle-blower. —Reuters

NBK provides services in 6 branches from 9 am to noon

KUWAIT: In light of the present situation in the country, the National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is committed to serving its customers through the following six branches: Head Office, Cinema Salmiya, Andalus, Al-Ahmadi, Sabah Al-Salem, and Saad Al-Abdullah. These branches will be open to customers from 9 am to 12 noon until 26th of March 2020, as per the guidelines of the Central Bank of Kuwait.

The bank is also taking precautionary measures to ensure the safety of customers and employees, and will be measuring the temperature of customers whom will also be asked to wear face masks and gloves before entering any of the operating branches. NBK has implemented strict pre-

cautionary measures since the beginning of the health situation to ensure it protects and preserves the safety of everyone.

Alternatively, customers can manage their accounts and make transactions at their convenience and at any time with NBK Mobile Banking and NBK Online Banking, without the need to visit a branch. During this period as well, the bank continues to provide banking services through the ITMs located at The Avenues and Terminal 4 at Kuwait International Airport. NBK's ATMs and CDMs also remain at the service of customers across Kuwait thanks to a network of 327 ATMs, including more than 100 CDMs.

Speaking of the measures implemented, Head of Local Branches at National Bank of Kuwait, Ghadeer Al-Awadhi, said: "NBK is committed to continue serving its customers through these specifically-dedicated branches. We have also ensured securing all necessary precautions in our branches to preserve the health and safety of both our customers and employees."

Al-Awadhi added that customers can complete their transactions by visiting these specific branches during the designated working hours or through NBK Mobile and Online Banking. She

India's Yes Bank bailout approved, posts big loss

NEW DELHI: A central bank-backed proposal to rescue embattled Yes Bank has been approved and withdrawal limits will be lifted, officials said, as India's fourth-largest private lender posted a big quarterly loss.

Yes Bank was struggling with bad loans and on the brink of collapse when the Reserve Bank of India seized control of the lender on March 5 and imposed withdrawal limits for customers.

Eight banks-led by the country's largest lender the State Bank of India (SBI) — committed to investing in the plan, which has been approved by the government, Yes Bank said in a regulatory filing Saturday.

The withdrawal limits for customers

would be lifted on Wednesday, the lender added.

"We are an integral part of the financial system and we must support other banks that have gone into difficulty," Deepak Parekh, the chairman of HDFC, one of the lenders investing in Yes Bank, told the Times of India yesterday. "The difficulty may be due to any reason but there are a large number of depositors, borrowers, and employees. We are reasonably confident that the bank will be revived."

The State Bank of India (SBI) had announced Thursday it would invest 72.50 billion rupees (\$977 million) in the troubled lender. The announcement came as Yes Bank late Saturday reported a net loss of 185.6 billion rupees in the three months to December 31, compared to a profit of 10.2 billion rupees in the previous corresponding period.

India's financial system had been hit by liquidity concerns more than a year after the near-collapse of IL&FS, one of the nation's biggest "shadow banks" —



MUMBAI: The headquarters of one of India's major private banks, Yes Bank, is pictured in Mumbai yesterday. —AFP

finance houses responsible for significant consumer lending. A resulting reluctance of banks to lend money has

exacerbated the woes of Asia's third-biggest economy, with growth remaining sluggish. —AFP

Credit crunch risks turning firms into zombie army

PARIS: A decade of easy money sloshing around the economy may come to haunt policymakers as legions of firms hooked on cheap credit have no buffers to make it through the coronavirus crisis without serious damage, or outright failure.

Amid signs that banks and investors have already retrenched their lending, central banks are trying to ensure that the flow of credit to businesses remains open. But those loans, however soft, will still have to be paid back, and therein lies the rub as many won't be able to generate the necessary revenue. The volume of corporate debt struck an all-time real term dollar high of \$13.5 trillion at the end of last year, according to the OECD.

Including bank borrowings, "the global (corporate) debt-to-GDP ratio ... is near a record high of 94 percent and is at, or near, all-time highs in many major economies," Capital Economics noted in a recent report. This has created a growing number of so-called zombie firms-companies who just about manage to pay interest on their loans with ongoing credit deals, but have no prospect of settling up on the principal. A 2018 report by the Bank of International Settlements put zombie firms at between 6 and 12 percent of total companies and said that ample cheap credit was partly to blame.

Even if that number is seems small it can quickly turn into a major risk.

Journey to junk?

Capital Economics said it had identified a "BBB bulge" in the US and eurozone corporate bond mar-

kets comprising just over half of all new investment grade bonds over the past three years. BBB is the lowest investment-grade rating. When firms drop below this into "junk" territory they face higher borrowing costs as many investment funds are limited to buying only investment-grade bonds.

A virus-induced recession or a surge in borrowing costs, or both, could trigger bond ratings agencies downgrade many of these bonds into junk status. "The greater the virus-related disruption, the closer we will get to this tipping-point" with the virus acting as a "trigger", warned Capital Economics. The OECD estimates that if a financial shock arrived comparable to 2008 then \$500 billion worth of corporate debt would migrate to junk-rated levels inside 12 months.

Zombies and other struggling firms would then come under intense pressure to lower their debt through job cuts and salary freezes, as well as cut-backs on investment.

But "this then hits demand, which in turn prolongs downturns which weighs on profitability, making further deleveraging more likely" in what becomes a vicious circle, said Capital Economics. Such an impact on the wider economy is what economists call second-round shocks and can cause a longer and deeper crisis than the original upheaval. "We are at the eye of the storm," said Vincent Marioni, European director for investments in Europe with Allianz global investment management firm.

Central banks to the rescue

"The important thing over the coming two months is to maintain the liquidity of firms and ensure that a liquidity crisis does not morph into an insolvency crisis," says Florence Barjou, head of multi-asset investment with Lyxor AM. While central banks including the US Federal Reserve have lowered interest rates, they have also undertaken steps to ensure the credit taps remain open.



Amid signs that banks and investors have already retrenched their lending, central banks are trying to ensure that the flow of credit to businesses remains open. —AFP

The European Central Bank unveiled a number of such so-called targeted measures after its meeting on Thursday. In particular it lowered the rate on funds it makes available to banks to pass onto companies, and in certain cases it will be paying banks to lend on the funds.

The ECB, which supervises large eurozone banks, also said it would allow them to temporarily lower capital buffers and use additional types of assets.

"Banks will see a weakening of their loan book quality as the effects of the virus will reduce global travel and factory output, and dampen domestic demand in Europe," said Bernhard Held, VP senior credit officer for Moody's Investors Service. "The outbreak adds to late-cycle risks associated with weakening economic prospects across the region as reflected in our negative outlook for the European banks." Allianz's Marioni noted that in the United States a large chunk of corporate debt is directly linked to the oil sector. —AFP

Business

KAMCO Oil Market Monthly Report

Oil price drops 50% from year's peak as OPEC+ coalition collapses

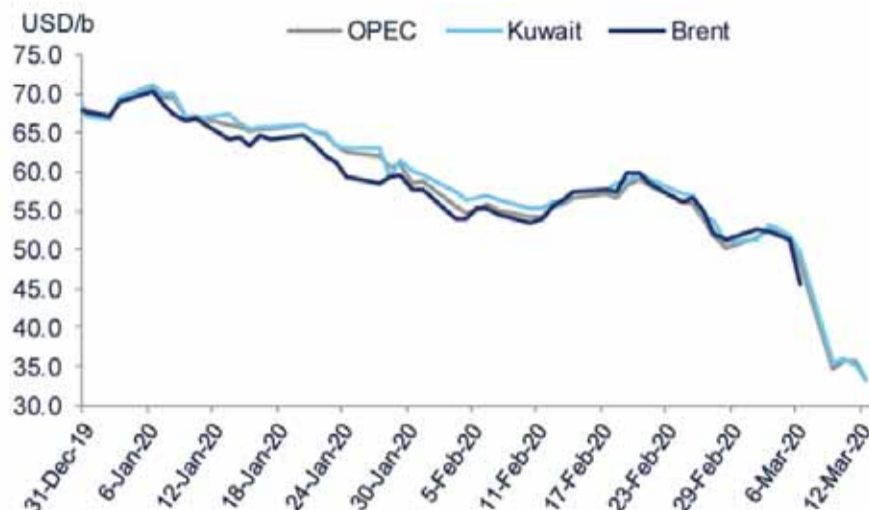
KUWAIT: Crude oil prices reached the lowest level since 2015 with the biggest one day drop since the 1991 Gulf War after OPEC+ members failed to reach an agreement to deepen oil production cuts in response to lackluster demand trends. The current events in the oil market came as a double blow for oil fundamentals as this time the decline prices was triggered by declining demand as well as an increase in crude oil production. The slow-down in oil demand was led by the rapid spread of the coronavirus outside of China that has triggered a global response in order to contain the situation. A majority of these measures came in the form of curb in travel and restriction on movement of goods and services; however, a few steps also focused on providing stimulus that led to a temporary rebound in economy as well as crude prices.

In terms of curbs, the US issued travel warning for its citizens and suspended all flights from Europe for the next 30 days, similar to restrictions placed by a number of other countries. According to Bloomberg, this would affect 180 tb/d or 4 percent of global aviation fuel demand. Domestic oil demand also took a hit with restricted movement of people within a majority of the affected countries. Meanwhile, post rate cuts by US Fed and BoE, the US government is working on a payroll tax relief to support economic growth and increase disposable income, in addition to plans of providing emergency capital to small businesses. The UK government announced a fiscal stimulus of GBP 12 Bn, whereas China is proposing further cuts in banking reserve ratio to support the SME sector. Meanwhile, the ECB didn't announce a rate cut, but announced a wide-ranging package of bond purchases and cheap loans to kickstart growth.

In view of the new realities facing the oil market, OPEC, in its latest monthly report, slashed oil demand forecast for 2020 by 920 tb/d and now expects flattish demand growth of merely 60 tb/d as compared to 2019. Meanwhile, the IEA said that it expects the first yearly drop in oil demand in 2020 since the 2009 financial crisis. The agency lowered its forecast for oil demand by 1.1 mb/d and now expects a decline of 90 tb/d in oil requirements in 2020. On the other hand, the US EIA forecasted the most optimistic of the demand expectations with an estimated growth of 0.37 mb/d in 2020. On the supply front, Saudi Arabia is said to be looking at raising oil output to more than 12 mb/d and a similar move was reported by UAE, which said it is positioned to increase production to 4 mb/d in April-2020. In terms of capacity, Saudi Arabia is accelerating its capacity build up from 12 mb/d to 13 mb/d. On the other hand, Russia can see a potential increase of as much as 0.5 mb/d. Based on Feb-2020 production data, OPEC had a spare capacity of 6.1 mb/d Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE accounting for 42 percent of this based in their existing capacities.

Oil Prices

Oil prices plunged by more than 30 percent



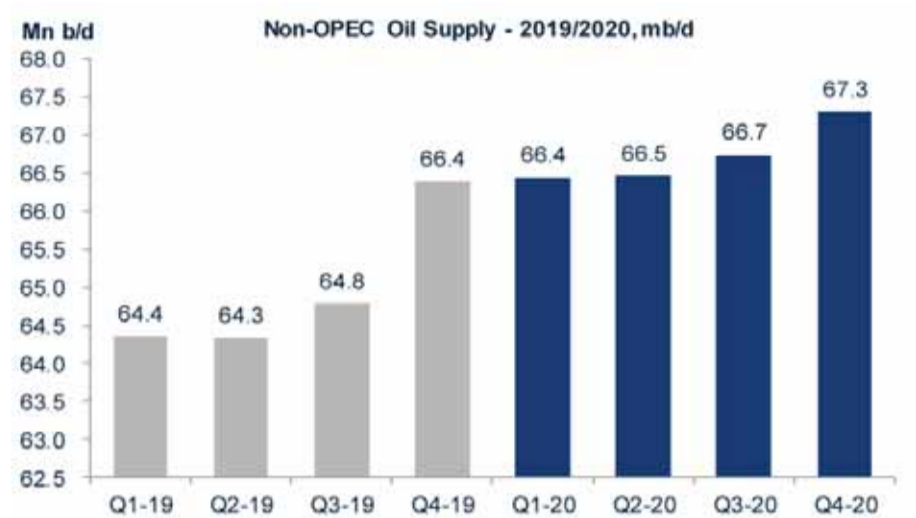
after the disagreement on the proposed OPEC+ production cuts that led to the dismantling of the agreement. Prices partially recovered during the day and closed the session with a loss of more than 25 percent for a majority of the crude grades. This was the biggest single day decline since the 1991 Gulf War that pushed prices to the lowest in almost five years. Crude prices showed marginal recovery in the following session but failed to keep the momentum in the subsequent trading sessions. As a result, as of 11-March-2020, oil prices had fallen 50 percent since the peak of 2020. Nevertheless, the crash in oil prices came as a silver lining for a majority of oil consuming countries and a number of sectors that could support prices in the near term. According to reports, after Saudi Arabia lowered its official selling price of crude, the demand has increased by almost 50 percent from some its top consumers. Crude shipments in the pipeline to the US Gulf Coast have also seen a steep spike. For European consumers, Saudi Arabian crude has seen a multifold increase in allocations. According to Bloomberg reports, the daily chartering cost of an oil tanker on the Middle East to China route has increased six times due to higher demand.

In terms of sectoral consumption, the fall in crude prices have benefitted US corn and soybean farmers across the Midwest that has led to an increase in demand for cheap diesel for the spring planting season. The rush can be seen in both the spot market as growers are filling fuel tanks as well as locking in prices for future prices. In addition, mining companies are also benefitting from lower oil prices as fuel is a key operating cost for these companies. We expect oil prices to recover from the lows of Mar-2020 in two waves: the first when there is initial evidence on a renewed agreement on oil production levels being reached from OPEC+ countries, in particular Saudi Arabia and Russia. The second wave of gains in oil prices would come from early signaling of a recovery of global economic trade and other high frequency economic data when the impact of COVID-19 starts dissipating.

World Oil Demand

World oil demand growth estimates for 2019 was once again revised downwards by 0.08 mb/d to a growth of 0.83 mb/d with demand estimated to have averaged at 99.67 mb/d. The revision once again reflected lower-than-expected demand data for the OECD Americas region. The US recorded y-o-y decline in oil demand during December-19, whereas the latest available monthly data for Mexico for Jan-2020 showed a decline in overall demand as higher diesel usage was more than offset by fall in demand for gasoline and residual fuel oil.

The OECD Europe region also showed softer demand trends during December-19 led by warmer weather across the region. The latest automobile fleet data for the Europe region showed a decline in new car registrations in January-2020 with primary impact in countries like Germany, France and Italy. In the OECD Asia Pacific region, Japan's January-2020 data showed a oil demand decline of 0.42 mb/d, the biggest decline since 2016. Demand growth estimates for the overall OECD region was lowered by 0.06 mb/d primarily for 2H-19 led by a decline in industrial fuels demand, weaker gasoline demand and warmer weather conditions in Q4-19. For the non-OECD region, demand was lowered by 0.02 mb/d reflecting a decline in demand from the Other Asia region during 2H-19. Oil demand growth expectations for 2020 once again saw a steep downward revision 0.92 mb/d to a growth of 0.06 mb/d. With this marginal growth, world oil demand for 2020 is now expected to be lower than the 100 m/d mark at 99.73 mb/d. The revision reflected a decline in demand for the transportation and industrial fuels in China due to COVID-19 in addition to declining consumption from India, although the latter is showing signs of a consumption recovery post the decline in oil prices. India recorded a decline in oil demand for the second consecutive month in January-2020 owing to a fall in middle and heavy distillate consumption that was partially offset by growth in light distillate products. China showed a growth of 0.16 mb/d in Jan-2020, well below average monthly



growth of last year. Expected demand growth from OECD countries was lowered by 0.32 mb/d with a majority of this decline expected to be seen during 1H-2020 while non-OECD demand was lowered by 0.6 mb/d.

World oil supply

According to preliminary data, world oil supply witnessed a m-o-m decline of 0.29 mb/d during February-2020 and averaged at 99.75 mb/d. For the full year 2019, non-OPEC oil supply growth estimate was once again revised up by 91 tb/d to a growth of 1.99 mb/d with total supply expected to average at 64.97 mb/d. The revision mainly reflected upward changes to biofuel production estimates for Developing Countries to the tune of 67 tb/d coupled with higher than expected supply from OECD countries by 32 tb/d mostly in Q4-19. These increases were partially offset by downward revisions in supply figures for China's coal-to-liquid output as well as lower estimated supplies from the UK and Australia. For 2020, supply growth forecast was revised downward by 0.49 mb/d to a growth of 1.76 mb/d and average at 66.74 mb/d during the year. Expected supply growth from the US was revised down by 0.36 mb/d to a growth of 0.9 mb/d. The US reported a decline in production during December-19 and estimates suggest a further decline of 80 tb/d each for January-2020 and February-2020. Nevertheless, production is expected to see a seasonal recovery in March-2020 and April-2020. For the overall OECD region, supply growth estimates were lowered by 0.41 mb/d to an average of 31.21 mb/d with an expected growth of 1.27 mb/d. Production estimate for OECD Europe shows a growth of 0.29 mb/d to reach 4 mb/d led by higher production in UK and Norway.

OPEC oil production & spare capacity

OPEC crude production witnessed a steep decline during February-2020 to reach a 10-year low level primarily led by a free fall in production in Libya that was partially offset by higher production primarily in Iraq and Nigeria. According to Bloomberg data, production

in February-2020 stood at 27.9 mb/d, a decline of 480 tb/d from the previous month. OPEC secondary sources estimated the decline to be even steeper at 546 tb/d resulting in an average production of 27.8 mb/d during the month. OPEC's monthly production excluded data for Ecuador that is no more a member of the OPEC group. The decline in production in Libya was led by a blockade of ports and oilfields. The country produced at an average rate of 150 tb/d during February-2020, a decline from over 1 mb/d at the start of the year.

Iraq increased production by 90 tb/d to 4.61 mb/d, while Nigeria raised average output by 100 tb/d to 1.93 mb/d. The failure to deepen and extend the OPEC+ agreement came as a big shock for the oil market as prices plunged on the news of the expected output growth that would worsen the supply glut. In the events that followed, Saudi Arabia's Energy Ministry asked Aramco to increase its production capacity, whereas ADNOC said it would increase production by 25 percent to 4 mb/d starting from next month. Saudi Arabia said it would hike its crude oil production to 12.3 mb/d from April-2020 and increase its capacity to 13 mb/d. In addition, according to reports, the neutral zone shared by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia has offered its first crude for export in April-2020 and the full production capacity of 550 tb/d is expected to be reached before the end of next year.

On the other hand, a number of shale players in the US announced to slash spending in the coming years due to depressed oil prices. A recent report said that 59 percent of shale producers need prices of more than \$50/b to support new capital investment in 2020. A number of producers have also announced a reduction in drilling activity. Also, the latest announcement from the US government to buy 90 million barrels of oil to support prices had little impact on prices. We believe this would position OPEC producers in a better footing to take advantage of the expected recovery in demand during 2H-2020 that would also support prices.

Staying safe, and sane, as Silicon Valley locks down

PALO ALTO: David Tollner gets text messages telling him when meals are placed outside the door of the family guest room, where he was banished after developing a cough. His wife Mitra Ahani is taking no chances as the coronavirus pandemic spreads in the United States—even though she knows her husband may have no more than a common cold. When Tollner returned to their home near Santa Cruz from a conference in Baltimore, she steered him directly to the shower, leaving doors open so he wouldn't touch them, and wiped down his suitcase with bleach.

When he started coughing, Tollner was relegated to a spare room. "I locked him in the guest room," confirmed Ahani, a chief executive of a center that provides educational support for children with disabilities, who like millions in this tech-savvy region has shifted to remote work in response to the spreading coronavirus.

"He probably caught a little cold out there. But it scared the daylights out of him, and he needed that." In an interview with AFP, Tollner wryly acknowledged his predicament. "I'm here in the dungeon waiting for food and water," he said Friday. "I have been here for a couple of days now trying not to infect the world with something I don't know I even have." Tollner relies on his laptop and smartphone to run his law firm in the Silicon Valley city of San Jose.

Like tens of millions across the United States—where school districts are closing one after the other and firms are massively encouraging telework—the family is avoiding going out, relying for daily life on many of the technologies invented or refined in the area. Ahani orders most of what they need from an online grocery delivery service, wearing gloves and wiping down goods with sanitizer when they arrive.

Martha Lackritz-Peltier, an attorney at non-profit group TechSoup, is working from her home in Oakland, where her companions include two dogs and hummingbirds flitting about the garden. "Frankly, I kind of enjoy the flexibility of sometimes lying in bed with my laptop and working on my lap," she said. "I love being able



MOUNTAIN VIEW: A lunch time "Block Party" of food trucks is seen empty 2020 at Google's main campus in the Silicon Valley city of Mountain View as remote work becomes the norm to defend against the spread of novel coronavirus (COVID-19). —AFP

to sit outside and get some sunlight." Remote collaboration platform Slack has been speaking with companies of all sizes about tools and techniques for employees to work together in real-time while being physically apart. "Isolation is one of the biggest threats to a team's engagement and motivation, and it can happen silently day by day," a company spokesperson said. "Maintaining camaraderie, encouragement, and collaboration can make all the difference in the weeks ahead."

Across Silicon Valley, streets have emptied as the pandemic takes hold, claiming more than 50 lives so far in the United States. People were few and far between at the "Googleplex" in Mountain View midday on Thursday, a time when throngs typically stroll, sun or grab meals at the cornucopia of food trucks or cuisine stations on the tech giant's campus.

A Googler wearing eyeglasses with tiger-stripe frames stood alone in the shade of a tree near a daily "Block Party" lunchtime event for employees on campus. "At least the block party was a lot better today—there were no lines," he said. At Facebook's closed campus in the nearby city of Menlo Park, valets stood idle in mostly empty parking lots usually crammed to overflowing. Empty shuttle buses came and went from

vacant stops. No one could be seen in the town-square style center courtyard at One Hacker Way, and birdsong was the only tweeting of note. "Stir-crazy" Foot traffic was scarce in Palo Alto, a social hub for Silicon Valley as well as nearby Stanford University, which has suspended in-person classes. "The street has been quieter, but we have been busy all day," Zombierunner barista Zac Terrones told AFP while whipping up an oat milk latte.

"I think people working are getting stir-crazy at home and coming in for a little pop. I've washed my hands about 200 times today."

Stanford students Ende Shen and Yaqing Yang, both 21-year-old juniors from China, studied at a table on the sidewalk.

"We have communities on campus and some of them are kind of falling apart simply because of the health issues," said Shen, who is from a city near Shanghai. Yang tries to stick to a routine, scheduling time to spend in the sunshine and study with peers such as Shen. "I think it is really important to be in contact with the world despite bearing in mind social distancing," said Yang, who is from the capital of Sichuan province. "I also cook a bit more now; it helps me stay sane and feel I have less need to go to crowded spaces." —AFP

US giant Boeing hammered by dual crises

NEW YORK: Boeing lost \$52 billion on the stock market in a week, a rout that underscores the challenges facing the aircraft manufacturer amid setbacks over the 737 MAX and the coronavirus pandemic. But Boeing remains a business behemoth key to the American economy. The industrial giant has lost all the gains amassed since President Donald Trump arrived in the White House in January 2017, which begs the question: Is the maker of the presidential plane, Air Force One, on solid financial ground?

For years, investors believed the 104-year-old company was a safe bet, because it has driven multiple technological revolutions and operates in a safe and growing market, says Richard Aboulafia, aviation expert at Teal Group. But "these beliefs are being tested" with the 737 MAX crisis, he said. "Boeing is in distress and a lot of that is self-inflicted."

Short on cash?

Boeing itself helped sow doubt this week: According to AFP banking sources, the aircraft manufacturer drew on the full \$14 billion credit line it only just secured from banks last month. That request gave the impression the company is strapped for cash, said Ken Herbert at Canaccord Genuity.

Boeing, which faces a mountain of lawsuits from families of victims of the Ethiopian Airlines and Lion Air crashes involving its troubled 737 MAX, wants to make sure it has enough reserves to deal with any unexpected problems in the current uncertain climate in the financial markets, sources familiar with the matter told AFP. "There is no cash issue," said one source. Contacted by AFP, the company declined to comment.

Boeing estimates that the MAX crisis will cost it at least \$18.7 billion, which caused its debt to explode to \$27 billion as of December 31, 2019. The manufacturer has neither produced nor delivered any MAX aircraft, which have been grounded

for a year after the second of the two deadly crashes, which together killed 346 people.

With the return to the skies uncertain, orders are in the red, and sales of the 787, its main source of income today, have slowed. Despite these issues "we do not believe Boeing will face a cash crunch," Herbert said, but new difficulties are mounting due to the spread of the coronavirus.

Not like the others

The pandemic poses the most serious crisis for the airline industry since the terrorist attacks of September 11, and likely will cause airlines to postpone their purchases of planes, and even cancel orders. Delta Air Lines has decided to postpone deliveries of new aircraft, while United Airlines will only take on new aircraft if it believes it can pay for them. "Our desire to hang in with Boeing until the return of the 737 MAX has worked out poorly, both regarding the timeline for re-certification and now more importantly with the impact of COVID-19 on aircraft demand," said Seth Seifman at JP Morgan, who until the pandemic was among the very few Wall Street experts advising investors not to sell their Boeing shares.

But Gregori Volokhine at Meeschaert argues that Boeing "is a business like no other." "They are so essential to the defense department that it is not a company that the government would drop," he said.

Not only does the group manufacture the KC-46 tanker as well as the F-18 and F-15 fighter jets, but it also is the leading American exporter with around 600 suppliers employing hundreds of thousands of people in the United States. The MAX assembly plant alone employs 12,000 people. When Boeing suspended production of the MAX in January, most economists believed that this decision would affect US growth in the first half. "The impact of the Boeing crisis on the economy "is bigger than what you would see in a hurricane," said Joel Prakken, economist at IHS Markit. —AFP

Flood-hit Zimbabweans look back to stilt homes

BINGA, Zimbabwe: Anyone driving through Binga, in western Zimbabwe, is greeted by a vision of the past dotted along the tarred road: thatched homes built on stilts, two meters above the ground.

The elevated structures - called ngazi - were the traditional homes of the indigenous Tonga people who live in the district until a push for modernity in the 1950s led them to swap the wooden huts for brick homes built on the ground. Now, as the area experiences increasingly intense droughts and flash flooding linked to climate change, the Tonga and others living near the Zambezi River, along the border with Zambia, are looking to the lessons of the past and switching back to homes on stilts.

Elias Mudenda, a villager from Siachilaba, 50 km (30 miles) from Binga, said that in the past three years 50 families in his community have built ngazi alongside their brick homes. He built two of his own in 2017.

"Today, the ngazi structure is very common along the banks of the Zambezi," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Climate experts note that Zimbabwe as a whole is getting hotter. In March 2019, the country suffered five consecutive days of temperatures on average 2 to 4 degrees Celsius above the normal March high of 32 degrees.

During hot weather, the height of the stilt homes and the air flow around them helps keep people within them cool, explained Christopher Tshuma, heritage education officer at the BaTonga Museum in Binga, which promotes Tonga culture. "The higher you go, the cooler it becomes," he said, noting that temperatures in the region around Binga can reach a stifling 42 degrees Celsius (108 degrees Fahrenheit).

The elevated huts also protect occupants and their belongings from the flash floods that have become increasingly common in recent years due to bouts of unusually heavy rain that can last days.

"(The Tonga) were very innovative and clever in that they used their natural environment to find solutions to flooding," Tshuma told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Built on poles made from mopane - a strong indigenous tree - ngazi are usually lined with wood, grass or reeds to provide warmth. The thatched roofs are made of bundles of grass that serve as insulation and are so tightly woven that they make the huts both waterproof and wind-proof, said Mudenda.

While there is no data on how many stilt homes have been built in Binga over the past few years, Mudenda said many people in the area made the switch because brick houses built on the region's sandy soils could not stand up to worsening floods.

"Homestead foundations keep shifting underneath our brick homes, causing the walls to crack," he explained. "Some tried to dig deeper foundations to support their houses, but it was no use."

Tapiwa Magidi, an exploration geologist with Zimbabwe's mining ministry, confirmed that flooding and drought are exacerbating the instability of soil in the area.

"During droughts, there is a lack of vegetation to hold the soil together, hence the sandy soils are not strong enough to support strong structures," he explained. "That's why you will find some houses cracking or falling down."

'In shock'

Binga district is known for being arid and dry, but over the past two years the area has been experiencing unpredictable flooding as well, according to Farai Marinyame, acting district development coordinator. In February, heavy rains displaced more than 200 families and killed one person, as they washed away roads, crops and livestock.

"Communities are still in shock because they were not expecting such a magnitude of rainfall," Marinyame said. Some communities around Binga are still in dire need of food aid and shelter, he noted, adding that the Zimbabwean government has offered to relocate the affected villagers to areas on higher ground and build them new houses.

Locals say all the homes destroyed by the floods were traditional brick structures, while all the stilt



A view of an elevated 'ngazi' home, set two meters above the ground and used as a bedroom, in Zimbabwe's Binga district, near the Zambezi River. —Reuters

homes were left standing. But even if their homes withstood the pounding of flood waters, many villagers still found themselves stranded, noted Gayson Siampongo, project officer for the Basilwizi Trust, a local community development organization.

Poor quality roads washed out and telecommunications were so poor that, in some cases, "villagers (had to) walk 11 km just to access mobile phone networks," Siampongo said.

Still, paying attention to indigenous knowledge - like the elevated houses - can help keep villagers from losing everything during flooding, said Nathan Nkomo, a director in the Civil Protection Unit.

But "there is the need to blend (indigenous knowledge) with scientific knowledge to come

up with suitable infrastructure above the ground and protect communities from flood disasters," he told Thomson Reuters Foundation in a telephone interview.

Other flood-prone areas could learn from the revival of stilt homes in Binga, said Matilda Mlotshwa, development coordinator for Nkayi district. Located about 350 km (217 miles) south of Binga, Nkayi also sits on sandy soil where "most buildings shake down when it rains too much," Mlotshwa told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"In Nkayi, we don't have elevated homesteads like in Binga. But because of recurring flooding there is the need for ngazi-style elevated structures to be built by our communities," she said. — Reuters

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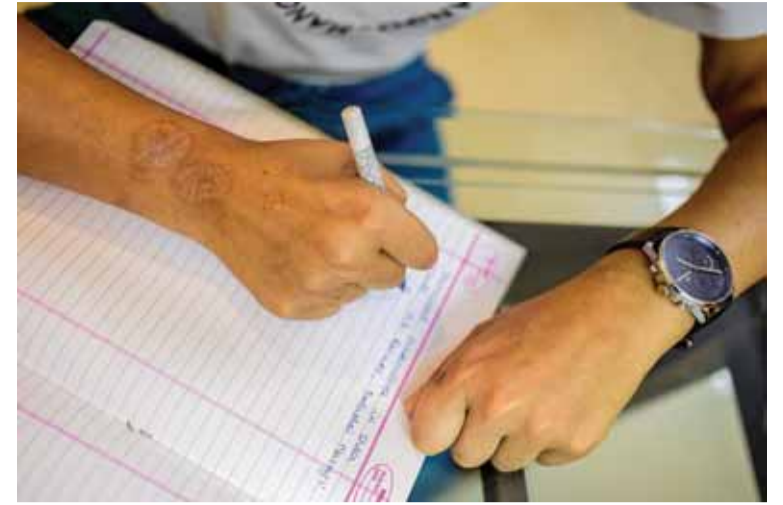
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In this handout photo Shreya Siddanagowder turns the pages of a notebook at her home in Pune.



In this photo Shreya Siddanagowder brushes her hair in a bathroom at her home in Pune.



In this photo Shreya Siddanagowder writes in a notebook at her home in Pune, more than two years after transplant surgery for both hands.

Hand-made tale: Indian amputee's new lower limbs adapt to her body

When amputee Shreya Siddanagowder was offered new hands, the Indian student didn't hesitate — even though they were big, dark and hairy, and once belonged to a man. Now though, not only have her new hands become more slender, they have also changed color to match her skin tone, mystifying the doctors who carried out the rare 13-hour transplant. “The donor was a tall man with big spindly fingers,” Siddanagowder's mother Suma told AFP by phone from their home in Pune in western India. “Now nobody can make out that they are a man's hands... She has even started wearing jewelry and nail varnish.”

Siddanagowder's life was turned upside down in 2016 when, aged 18, she was involved in a bus accident that crushed both her arms. A delay in getting first aid meant that both her hands had to be amputated below the elbow. Only 200 successful hand transplants have taken place worldwide — includ-

ing nine in India — since the first in the United States in 1999 on a man whose left lower limb had been blown off by a firework.

Search for donor

The first in India was conducted in 2015 at the Amrita Institute of Medical Science (AIMS) in the southern state of Kerala, where Siddanagowder's family took her. The biggest problem was finding a donor. For cultural reasons, Indian families are often reluctant for the hands of their loved ones to be made available after their death. “Usually you have to wait for a long time,” said Subramania Iyer, a member of a team of doctors who operated on Siddanagowder.

As a result, those seeking a transplant “are so desperate that they don't mind if the hands are from a different gender”, Iyer, a specialist in reconstructive surgery, told AFP. Eventually, the hospital obtained a pair of hands from a man in August 2017.

Siddanagowder and her family accepted. The donor hands were first attached by the bones before the tendons; blood vessels and skin were painstakingly stitched together. After the transplant, she had to undergo more than a year of physiotherapy for her body and brain to get used to the new hands and obtain mobility and sensation.

Birthday gift

Iyer said that the color of Siddanagowder's hands quickly began to show “a lot of change”, but that it is difficult to pinpoint why. “It could be because of MSH... a brain-controlled hormone that stimulates melanin production. We are wondering if MSH levels can really influence the skin color.” Melanin is a natural pigment that gives skin — as well as hair and eyes — their color. Dr. Shehla Agarwal, a leading dermatologist in New Delhi, said that the absence of testosterone explained why the hands became less hairy, and agreed that other hormonal changes

might explain the change in color. But she also cited other possible factors.

“The donor male may have been exposed to more sunlight and physical activity compared to the woman,” Agarwal told AFP. Shreya on her part is loving the transformation — she even wrote her recent college exam with her new hands — and so are her doctors. “We all feel very happy for her,” said Iyer. “The best moment was when she sent me a hand-written note on my birthday. I could not have asked for a better birthday gift.” — AFP



This handout photo taken on August 28, 2017 and received courtesy of the family of Shreya Siddanagowder shows Siddanagowder after her hands transplant surgery at a hospital in Pune.



Mali backs singer *Rokia Traore* held in France

Mali's government on Saturday expressed its support for singer Rokia Traore, arrested earlier this week on a Belgian warrant over a child custody dispute with her ex-partner. The Malian singer was detained as she arrived from Bamako at Paris's Charles De Gaulle airport on Tuesday — but Mali's government said Saturday said she held a diplomatic passport. Mali's government “expresses its solidarity with our compatriot”, it said in a statement, adding that its diplomatic and consular services had been mobilized to try to resolve the situation. Traore's lawyer, Kenneth Feliho said the French authorities had ignored this fact when they acted on the Belgian-issued warrant accusing her of kidnapping, sequestration and hostage-taking.

The warrant followed a court ruling against singer and guitarist Traore late last year ordering her to return her five-

year-old daughter to her father, who is Belgian. A court hearing in France is due on Wednesday to examine the request for her extradition to Belgium. Belgian prosecutors told AFP that the singer is subject to two European arrest warrants: the first issued in October 2019 for having ignored the first Belgian court order. The second warrant was issued when she failed to honor a commitment she had made in January before a Belgian judge that she would return with the child within a month, said the prosecutor's office. Traore is appealing the decision of the Belgian court granting full custody to her former partner, said her lawyer. Away from music, Traore is known for her work for refugees and was made a UN ambassador for refugees in 2016. — AFP

Italian architect of Barcelona stadium dies of virus at 92

Vittorio Gregotti, an Italian architect who designed the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympics stadium, died yesterday at the age of 92 after catching the novel coronavirus, Italian media said. Gregotti died of pneumonia after being hospitalized in Milan having contracted COVID-19, the AGI news agency and the Corrieredella Sera newspaper reported. He also

designed the Arcimboldi Opera Theatre in Milan, a futuristic structure built to allow the opera season to continue while the La Scala underwent renovation in 2002-2004.

Paying tribute, fellow Italian architect Stefano Boeri called Gregotti a “master of international architecture” who “created the story of our culture”. “What a great sadness,” he wrote on Facebook. Gregotti's wife Mariana Mazza has been hospitalized at the same Milan hospital, Corrieredella Sera said, without providing details on why. — AFP



Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti

As virus strikes festivals, red carpets happen in living rooms

Hollywood directors who had their glitzy premieres canceled due to coronavirus are finding inventive ways to build buzz for their films — including bringing the red carpet into their living rooms. Movie festivals such as SXSW in Texas and Tribeca in New York have been scrapped in recent days as the deadly pandemic spreads. This has shorn major titles of the publicity generated by opening night reviews and galas, and left hundreds of unsold indie films without distributors. The makers of “The Carnivores,” a quirky thriller-meets-love story set to debut at SXSW, took matters into their own hands by shifting the “premiere” to the cinematographer's Austin home.

“We have full catering, we have a red carpet, we have a photographer coming, we have local news,” said director Caleb Michael Johnson. The red carpet will run from the front porch, through the house, and back to a taco stand — which is being catered for free by a local sponsor. The idea emerged from a three-hour bar conversation the day the festival was canceled. “It was crazy because we weren't even that drunk! The ideas came really fast,” said cinematographer Adam Minnick. “Our world premiere was Saturday 14th and dammit we wanted to still have our screening on Saturday 14th in Austin.”

The same tactic was employed by US actor David Arquette, whose documentary about his controversial forays into pro wrestling shifted from a SXSW premiere to his home near Hollywood within 24 hours. Arquette and his wife flew in the director

from the East Coast — and made a dash to wholesale store Costco for drinks — before guests gathered on couches and the living room floor, the Los Angeles Times reported.

'No substitute'

Johnson said the more intimate nature of these events put guests at ease about the risk of contagion — but others are skipping physical events altogether, turning to technology. David Magdael, a publicist who had four world premieres set for SXSW, looked into screening films at Hollywood agencies' offices after the festival was canceled — but had to scrap that too after the town shut up shop. Fortunately, trade press including IndieWire still intend to publish reviews on the days that films were due to premiere. “On our end, on the PR side, we're still moving forward as if the film festival is happening,” said Magdael. SXSW's prestigious film competitions will go ahead as planned, with movies available to juries online. “We know it's no substitute for the live SXSW event with its unique and fantastic audience, but at least it's some way to get attention for these wonderful films,” said organizer Janet Pierson. Spencer Folmar's new drama about the opioid crisis, intended to screen at the postponed Beverly Hills Film Festival, will hit streaming platforms on the day it was due in theaters nationwide.

“It's a shame, you know — this is two years in the making, and everyone loves the theatrical experience,” he said of “Shooting Heroin.” The movie will now rely on online advertising and sending digital “screener”

links to critics. “But this is what we have to do for the sake of the film and getting the message out.”

'Scary'

Despite these creative solutions, some damage from festivals closing will be hard to repair. Lindsay Lindenbaum's documentary “Tomboy,” about four famous female drummers, was relying on SXSW to secure final funding needed to buy expensive music licensing. One of the film's subjects, Bobbye Hall, played on Marvin Gaye's soul hit “What's Going On.” The song “is such an important piece of music in the film to really show what a legend she is,” said the director.

She plans to launch an online fundraiser seeking donations next week. Ashley Eakin, director of short comedy “Single” about two people with disabilities who are set up on a date, fears the momentum that SXSW would have given her fledgling career could be lost. “It's hard because I've never gotten into a big festival, and SXSW can potentially be a once in a lifetime thing,” she said. She added: “It's kind of scary, especially for us new filmmakers... We're all on the cusp of things happening and people being interested in us.” We're worried that it could be a full year, or however long it's going to take, for them to be wanting to take a risk again. — AFP



File photo shows SXSW logo in Austin, Texas. — AFP

Broderick's sister is 'on the road to recovery' after coronavirus diagnosis

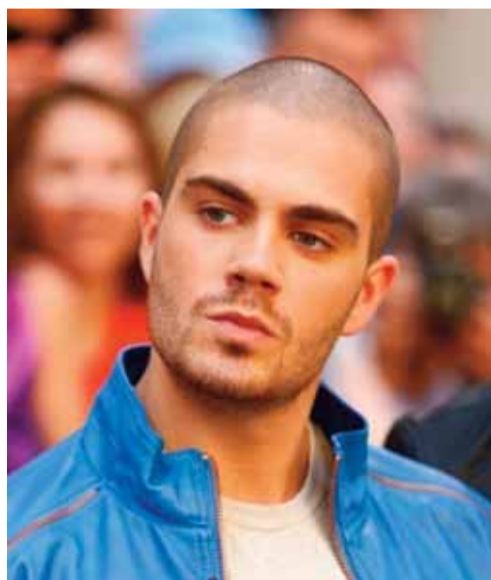


Matthew Broderick's sister is "on the road to a full recovery" after being diagnosed with coronavirus. The 57-year-old actor - who is married to Sarah Jessica Parker - has revealed that his 64-year-old sibling, Janet Broderick, is currently recovering in Beverly Hills, California, after being taken into hospital with the virus. Matthew explained to People: "My entire family is grateful for the concern about, and the well wishes for, my sister Janet. I'm happy to say she is feeling much better and is on the road to a full recovery. "We are all very appreciative for the wonderful care she received from the amazing doctors and nurses at Cedars-Sinai." Janet fell ill after attending the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes conference in Louisville, Kentucky. Another attendee of the parish - All Saints Episcopal Church - was previously diagnosed with the virus. The church said: "She is receiving the best medical care available and her doc-

tors' prognosis is for a complete and full recovery. "It will take some time, but Janet is resting comfortably at Cedars until the time she is released and can return home to complete her recovery." Meanwhile, Matthew and his wife recently announced they were suspending their Broadway revival of Neil Simon's 'Plaza Suite' due to the virus. Sarah, 54, explained on Instagram: "Broadway doesn't stay quiet for long. We will be back. The Rialto will hum. Times Square will hustle and bustle. And we will be ready to swing open the doors of the beautiful Hudson Theatre and share an afternoon or evening together. "We count the days until the marquees are once again lit. In the meantime, we think of all those affected and hope for everyone's good health. X.S). (sic)"

Max George 'burgled after Manchester gig'

Max George was burgled shortly after performing a gig in Manchester. The 31-year-old pop star - who is best known as a member of The Wanted - was performing an intimate hotel show last month before his room was "ransacked" by thieves, who stole a series of luxury items, including a Rolex watch. A source told The Sun on Sunday newspaper: "Max was meeting fans and having his pictures taken. "The other guy started bad-mouthing his girlfriend (Stacey Giggs). "Max was shaken and went straight up to his room, where he found out he'd been broken in to. His girlfriend Stacey also had her stuff stolen - there were tablets, money and his Rolex." A representative for Max has since confirmed there is an ongoing police investigation into the incident. Meanwhile, Greater Manchester Police said: "Police were called to a report of a burglary at a hotel on Piccadilly, Manchester, shortly before 12.15pm on Saturday 29 February 2020." A man forced entry to a room before stealing a handbag. A man has been arrested and remains in custody. Enquiries are ongoing." Max - who was previously engaged to actress Michelle Keegan - has been dating Stacey since 2019. And the pop singer has admitted he is keen to settle down with his girlfriend, saying he "wouldn't be with her" if they didn't have a future together. Speaking about their long-term plans, Max - who previously starred on the American TV series 'Glee' - shared: "I've always wanted to get married, and I love kids." I wouldn't be with her if I didn't see a future. I don't want to jinx it, but I can really see myself ending up with Stacey."



Maya Jama's fake freckles

Maya Jama gives herself "fake freckles". The 25-year-old presenter likes to give the "illusion" she's not wearing any make-up by adding small brown spots to her complexion with Freck Faux Freckle Cosmetics. She explained to Britain's Cosmopolitan magazine: "If I'm wearing a lot of make-up, I add fake freckles to give the illusion of bare skin." I've got about three natural but make out it's over 20." On the days when Maya skips foundation, she always relies on her "savior" product, MAC Studio Fix Concealer, to hide dark circles and blemishes. She said "Concealer is my savior. It's my go-to for no make-up as I don't wear foundation, so I always apply this to cover up tired eyes." The former 'Circle' presenter has been using the same eyeliner since she was a teenager. She said: "Liquid liner was a big thing in my school but I had to spend hours trying to get it right. "I still use the same one." And Maya never strays from her favorite Maybelline Lash Sensational mascara to keep her lashes looking long. She said: "One of the cheapest products in my make-up bag and one of the best. "It will always be my favorite mascara." Maya recently admitted she never cooks and would rather order a takeaway after a busy day. She said: "I won't lie, I don't really cook." A lot of my DJing or hosting work happens in the evenings so, when I get in, I'm knackered. "I'll look at the contents of my fridge and think, 'I could either spend ages trying to cook all this and be even more tired by the end, or quickly order something.' "I'm a Deliveroo queen! My top picks are Five Guys and Papa Johns because it opens really late."

Roberts requested pink dressing room



Nicola Roberts has asked theatre bosses to paint her dressing room pink so she feels like she's "at home". The 34-year-old singer is starring in 'City of Angels' at the Garrick Theatre in London and wants to be able to relax before and after the shows so is keen for her surroundings to reflect the interior choices she made in her own house. She said: "My home decor is quite French. There are plants everywhere, a baby pink sofa, and low lighting." There's a little gold sofa and lots of pink. I've asked the theatre to paint my dressing room pink so I feel like I'm at home." The production has introduced the former Girls Aloud star to some movies she had never seen before and she's found them very calming. She explained to Grazia magazine: "'City of Angels' is set in the 1930s and my character's an aspiring actor called Avril." I wasn't that big on old Hollywood films before, but this has introduced me to them." I've been watching a lot of film noir, everything is very slow and the music is so elegant - it puts you in a really calm state." Nicola also finds visiting the gym very relaxing and thinks it's essential for her to be as fit as possible for her stage role. She said: "Usually I try to go to the gym in the evening but rehearsals have taken over so the gym's gone out of the window." But often I'd spend an hour there and have a sauna and steam." If I do half an hour of exercise, it keeps my cardio and stamina up. For this performance, I have to sing and dance, so if I'm not fit, I'll sound out of breath and I can't have that." I have meditated in the past, but I think the gym is like meditation if you get into the swing of it." —BangShowbiz

SAM SMITH 'STEPS UP SECURITY AT LONDON HOME'

Sam Smith has stepped up security after being targeted by burglars twice in a year. The 27-year-old singer is the owner of a five-bedroom, Grade II-listed home in Hampstead, North London - but Sam has now decided to upgrade security around the property, asking for permission to install new CCTV cameras, motion sensors and entry system monitors. A source told The Sun on Sunday newspaper: "Security will be a priority for anyone who's had their house broken into once, let alone twice and Sam is no exception." The attitude is if more money is needed to make this new home feel safe and comfortable, so be it." Sam's planning agent has also penned a letter to the local council. The letter reads: "The proposals have been drawn up following consultation with a security specialist and analysis of the security issues." Meanwhile, Sam recently admitted to loving touring the world as a queer artist. The chart-topping singer - who came out as gender non-binary in 2019 - said: "It's wonderful. It's amazing. "There are parts of the world where I've performed, such as in China, Abu Dhabi and places like that, where I'm singing my song 'Him' on stage and I have the flag come up and it feels very proud. I feel very proud." But it can be scary at times. In some countries where it's illegal you have to send your lyrics and



everything to them before you perform - but they OK it, they all OK it, and sometimes I can't believe they've OKed it, because it seems weird to me. "But I don't know what I should do: I don't know whether I should perform in places where it's illegal."

Vogue Williams: I'm a full timer on Instagram

Vogue Williams is a "full timer on Instagram". The 34-year-old model - who is married to TV star Spencer Matthews - has admitted to being hooked on the photo-sharing platform, saying that the vast majority of feedback she receives is "really nice". Vogue told the Irish Mail On Sunday newspaper: "I'm a full timer on Instagram and I love it." I actually have such a nice group of mums and different people who follow me and I would say about 95 per cent of the comments are really nice. "But if you look at someone like Kim Kardashian, the amount of abuse she gets and the comments, it's just like outrageous that people think it's OK to do something like that. "By contrast, Spencer isn't really a fan of social media, and rarely posts photos of anyone besides himself and his wife. Vogue - who has been married to Spencer since 2018 - shared: "Spencer doesn't really like social media at all. He only follows one person and that's me. "If you look at his timeline it's just a picture of me and that's the way he likes it. He always says, 'I don't want to see anyone else's s**t.'" Meanwhile, Vogue previously admitted she wants to have a second baby later this year. The model - whose son Theodore was born in September 2018 - revealed she intends to get pregnant and have another child before the year is up. Listing her goals for 2020 to Frankie Bridge on her podcast 'Open Mind', Vogue revealed: "Hopefully, we'll grow our family this year." You're biggest achievement is how happy you are and I think that we're in a really happy place, and would just like to be this happy by this time next year."



Paris Hilton wants to live forever

The 39-year-old heiress is concerned that "nothing" happens after death, which would be "boring", so she wants to find ways to become immortal. She told Britain's Cosmopolitan magazine: "Death scares me because I don't know what happens. "I just don't want it to be nothing because that would be so boring." I'm trying to figure out a way - freezing myself or inventing the fountain of youth pill - so people could live forever, like that movie 'Death Becomes Her'. "Paris feels "lucky" that she's retained her youthful appearance without resorting to cosmetic surgery. She said: "I feel 21 forever. And I'm all natural. I feel so lucky that my mum always told me to stay out of the sun." I feel lucky I haven't had to resort to what most people do in this town." Meanwhile, though Paris has ruled herself out of a reboot of 'The Simple Life', she admitted producers have quizzed her on who she think would be perfect for the show - which saw her and Nicole Richie try their hands at various tasks - if it did come back, but refused to say who she chose. She said: "My schedule is just so insane. I can't imagine leaving my life and going to the middle of nowhere and doing that again." Plus the show is so timeless and iconic, you can't remake that. "They asked me who I would recommend if I didn't want to do it myself. [Who did I say?] I can't tell. I've signed a confidentiality agreement. "I don't know [if it is coming back]. I don't think it'll ever be what it was, but it will be fun to watch other people do it."



Syria's brutal war enters 10th year

BEIRUT: Syria's brutal conflict entered its 10th year yesterday with President Bashar Al-Assad's regime consolidating its hold over a war-ravaged country where foreign powers are flexing their muscle. When Syrian anti-government demonstrators first took to the streets on March 15, 2011, they could scarcely have imagined their protests would turn into a complex war entangling rebels, jihadists and outside forces.

At least 384,000 people have since died, including more than 116,000 civilians, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor says. The war has left cities and villages in ruins, shattered the economy and displaced more than 11 million people internally and abroad, with many seeking refuge in neighbouring countries and Europe. "We've lost everything," said one of the displaced, Hala Ibrahim, a rights activist from Aleppo who now lives in Idlib province, the last rebel stronghold.

"I left my university, my house which was bombed," said the woman in her 30s. Nine years of revolution illustrate the extent of the suffering we have known, between exile, bombings and deaths." Assad, with the military support of Russia, Iran and Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, has clawed back control of over 70 percent of the war-torn country. Neighboring Turkey, which supports local armed groups, has deployed its troops across the border in Idlib province, now the last rebel bastion and refuge of millions of displaced people.

'Collective failure'

Syria's latest fragile ceasefire came into effect there earlier this month, and Turkish and Russian forces on Sunday kicked off joint patrols in Idlib, Russian and Turkish media said. The first patrol was however very brief and largely symbolic, as the route was "shortened because of provocations", Russia's defense ministry said. An AFP correspondent, covering a protest against the patrol some five kilometres away, said it never arrived on that section of the M4 highway.

Around 200 protesters had gathered on the road near the town of Nayrab, some setting tyres alight or piling tree branches across the thoroughfare. The March 5 ceasefire has for now stemmed a deadly Russia-backed military campaign in Idlib. The assault has killed nearly 500 civilians since December, the Observatory says, and forced nearly a million to flee their homes and shelters, according to the United Nations.

Among those displaced, Siham Abs and seven of her children have been living for the past two months in a camp near Bardaqli, not far from the Turkish border. Among the tents lined up along muddy paths, Abs said she and her family would like to wash, but don't know where. "I am 50 years old and I've never known such difficult times," she said. Many of those unable to find space in camps have been sleeping in fields or have sought shelter in schools, mosques and unfinished buildings.



AN NAYRAB, Syria: Protesting Syrians climb atop a Turkish military M60T tank and infantry-fighting vehicle (IFV) as they attempt to block traffic on the M4 highway in this village about 14 km southeast of the city of Idlib and seven kilometres west of Saraqib in northwestern Syria yesterday. — AFP

The UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, on Saturday said the enduring war was "proof of a collective failure of diplomacy". "The suffering of the Syrian people during this tragic and terrible decade still defies comprehension and belief."

The Syrian conflict was born of unprecedented anti-government demonstrations in the

southern city of Daraa. The protests spread across Syria, but a violent crackdown soon saw rebels take up arms and wrest key areas from government control. Jihadist groups also emerged, notably the Islamic State group which swept across large parts of the country and neighboring Iraq in 2014. — AFP

Trump tests negative for virus as US...

Continued from Page 1

"This evening I received confirmation that the test is negative," the president's physician Sean Conley said in a Saturday memo.

Trump, 73, had dismissed concerns over his exposure to the disease which has killed at least 51 Americans and upended the rhythm of daily life across the country, with millions working from home and schools shut. New York, the most populous US city, saw its first coronavirus death on Saturday, as store shelves were stripped bare after days of panic buying.

Across the Hudson River in Teaneck, New Jersey, Mayor Mohammed Hameeduddin called for a city-wide self-quarantine after 18 cases were confirmed in the township. "What we are saying is that we are ground zero," Hameeduddin said. "Expect or act as though you're going to infect somebody or somebody is going to infect you."

Vice President Mike Pence announced further curbs on travel to the United States, saying a ban imposed on European nations over the pandemic would be extended to the United Kingdom and Ireland tomorrow. The restrictions threw airports across the country into disarray, with incoming travelers forced to wait hours for medical screenings before passing through customs.

Illinois governor JB Pritzker said the long lines at Chicago's O'Hare airport were "unacceptable". "The federal government needs to get its s@#t together. NOW," he tweeted. Acting Homeland Security secretary Chad Wolf said his office was working with airlines to improve screening times. Trump advised against non-essential travel and said officials were also considering imposing domestic restrictions. "If you don't have to travel, I wouldn't do it," Trump said at a White House news conference. "We want this thing to end."

In an official proclamation, he also named Sunday a national day of prayer "for all people who have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic". Trump declared a national emergency on Friday,

Speaker says no plans for curfew...

Continued from Page 1

The Assembly speaker said that MPs have asked the defense minister to repatriate Kuwaitis from abroad and to provide them with all the facilities while they are in other countries. The government is preparing more quarantines in order to repatriate some 8,500 citizens currently living abroad, MP Saleh Ashour said.

The health ministry yesterday completed coronavirus testing for Egyptians, Lebanese and Syrians living in Farwaniya governorate who had returned from March 1 onwards. The ministry starts today testing the same nationalities residing in Hawally governorate. Sanad said the screenings of thousands of expatriates at the fairgrounds in Mishref have all been negative so far after four days of extensive tests.

Gulf shares dropped yesterday amid unprecedented shutdowns to ward off the spread of coronavirus, despite tens of billions of dollars in stimulus packages announced by oil-rich governments. Bourse Kuwait was the biggest loser with the Premier Index sliding 6.5 percent and the All-Shares Index shedding 5.5 percent as the country announced stringent virus containment measures.

The Saudi Tadawul market, the region's largest, dropped 1.1 percent despite the kingdom announcing a \$13.3 billion stimulus package to help the national economy cope with the effects of the virus and a low oil price. The market was also impacted by a 20.6 percent dive in 2019 net profit of energy giant Saudi Aramco whose shares ended down 1.0 percent. UAE's bourses in Dubai and Abu Dhabi ignored a \$27.2 billion stimulus package announced by the central bank, mainly directed at banks which were asked to delay debt payments of customers for up to six months.

Dubai shares dipped 3.4 percent, sliding below the 2,000-point mark for the first time since 2013, and the Abu Dhabi stock market ended the day

freeing up some \$40 billion in disaster relief funds. The US House of Representatives also passed a bill - crafted by Democrats in consultation with the Trump administration - to provide billions of dollars for free virus testing, emergency paid sick leave and family leave. It is expected to pass the Republican-majority Senate.

The coronavirus pandemic has claimed more than 5,800 lives in at least 137 countries. Repeatedly attacked for sending out mixed signals on the health crisis, the president raised eyebrows on Friday when, contrary to medical advice, he was seen shaking hands as he gathered his coronavirus response team at the White House. On Saturday, he blamed habit - "people put their hand out... you don't think about it" - but said it would have to change. "Maybe people shouldn't be shaking hands for the long term," said Trump, a self-declared germophobe.

Trump's virus test came after contact with the Brazilian delegation as well as US lawmakers and political leaders who have gone into self-quarantine over potential infection. Republican National Committee chairwoman Ronna McDaniel was on Saturday awaiting results of a virus test after she came down with flu-like symptoms. She reportedly attended an event in Florida with Trump on Monday and flew back to Washington on Air Force One.

On Saturday a 30-day US ban took effect on all travel from the EU's Schengen border-free zone, part of a global clampdown on travel to curtail the virus. Pence said the ban would include Britain and Ireland as of midnight EST today (0400 GMT tomorrow). Both countries had been excluded from the initial ban. "Americans in the UK or Ireland can come home. Legal (US) residents can come home," Pence said.

Trump also aimed a new jab at the US Federal Reserve, saying he wanted it to be "much more proactive" in moving to protect Americans from the widespread economic dislocation caused by the pandemic. But the president seemed otherwise subdued during Saturday's briefing, uncharacteristically offering praise to Democrats including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Trump also tweeted that he had a "nice conversation" with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and that it was "great to hear that his wonderful wife Sophie is doing very well". Trudeau has been tele-governing since his wife was diagnosed with COVID-19 on Thursday. — AFP

down 1.9 percent. Bahrain Bourse was down 1.5 percent while the markets of Qatar and Oman bucked the trend, rising 1.0 percent and 0.4 percent respectively. Last week, the seven bourses slumped to multi-year lows as the coronavirus hit the oil market hard and oil producers waged a price war that sent prices crashing.

Gulf Arab states expanded measures to contain the spread of coronavirus yesterday with Oman banning open ship-to-ship transfers with Iranian vessels, Abu Dhabi's bourse closing trading halls and Dubai shuttering cinemas, gyms and arcades. An American living in the Saudi capital Riyadh said his parents - in their 60s and 70s - cut short their visit and departed the kingdom on Saturday night before the flight suspension went into effect at 0800 GMT yesterday. "I'm glad that they're off even though it means 24 hours in the airport hotel in Dubai. Given their age and medical issues it's definitely better than stuck here for weeks," he told Reuters.

Saudi Arabia, which has locked down its eastern Qatif region where many infections were recorded, has 103 cases of the virus. Two gated compounds in the capital Riyadh housing hundreds of expatriates have each reported one case among residents, according to emails from management seen by Reuters. The Saudi health ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment and it was not clear if the two cases were already included in the kingdom's total count.

Many of the coronavirus cases recorded in Gulf Arab states have been linked to travel to Iran, which has emerged as an epicenter for the disease in the Middle East. Oman, across the Gulf from Iran, asked open-deck boats to immediately halt ship-to-ship trade with Iranian boats, state news agency ONA said yesterday.

In the UAE, regional tourism and business hub Dubai joined other emirates in shuttering cinemas, arcades and gyms. Dubai's large Global Village shopping and entertainment market, which runs from November to March each year, said it was closing early. The UAE capital Abu Dhabi shut down public beaches and parks. The Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange said yesterday it was closing all its trading halls until further notice, a day after Kuwait's bourse said it would do the same.

Iran closes shrine as 113 more die...

Continued from Page 1

place yesterday and officials made no mention of the measure. Members of the Basij, a volunteer militia loyal to Iran's establishment, were involved in helping people by handing out sanitary items on Tehran's streets. Several politicians and officials, both sitting and former, have been infected with the virus, and some have died from the illness.

The latest suspected case was Ayatollah Hashem Bahtayi Golpayegani, a member of the Assembly of Experts, which is tasked with appointing and monitoring Iran's supreme leader. President Hassan Rouhani denied lockdowns had been imposed on entire areas, and said provincial officials were not allowed to decide on the issue. "Neither today, nor during Nowrouz and before or after it, we have no quarantine and all businesses are free and government services will continue," Rouhani said at a televised news conference with business-owners.

"Provinces are under no circumstances allowed to decide regarding closures," he added, noting all decisions would be made by the Tehran-based headquarters tasked with fighting coronavirus. Rouhani announced a set of measures designed to ease pressure on businesses, including later deadlines for the payment of taxes, loans and bills. Cash handouts of up to six million rials (\$38) would go to three million impoverished households whose main breadwinners are "peddlers" or in temporary jobs. Another four million households would receive low-interest loans from between 10-20 million

Virus changes Gulf habits; Arabs treat...

Continued from Page 1

In Qatar's capital Doha, the usually bustling market in the heart of the tourist center was eerily quiet, while Riyadh's shopping district also lay barren. The Gulf countries have shut down cinemas and other entertainment centers - some even closing gyms and spas - as well as halting one of the region's favorite pastimes, smoking shisha in cafes.

Residents in the Omani capital of Muscat told AFP there had been much "fear and panic" over what many of them have termed "corona phobia" at a time when a small bottle of disinfectant is in almost everyone's pockets or bags. They said many people have stopped shaking hands or kissing each other on the cheeks, a common greeting across the Arab world. In Saudi Arabia, 60-year-old Abu Abdulrahman said he felt awkward about the rapidly changing social norms. "Do I shake hands and kiss or do I not? I don't know," he said. "I try not to do that, but I get embarrassed. What if the other person puts their hand out first?"

Meanwhile, both the UAE and Qatar have advised their citizens to stop the traditional "nose to nose" greeting, with Abu Dhabi instructing residents that a wave would suffice. Measures to combat the spread of the virus have also impacted the way many Muslims in the Gulf worship. After Saudi Arabia suspended the "umrah" year-round pilgrimage, it advised residents against praying in mosques if they have any symptoms of the virus.

Kuwait took additional steps and banned all mass prayers, an unprecedented move in a country where hundreds of thousands pray side-by-side every day. "Pray at home, pray at home," an imam preached in a recording that went viral on social media on Saturday. In the Sunni Muslim-dominated Gulf, there are hundreds of thousands of Shiite Muslims, many of whom travel to Iran regularly for pilgrimages. Despite ongoing tensions between some GCC countries and Tehran, there have been no reports of heightened social friction between the different sects.

This comes amid Saudi Arabia's decision to cordon off the mainly Shiite district of Qatif, where the majority of coronavirus cases were reported. "This is a time for unity locally, regionally and globally," Zainab Abdul Amir, a Bahraini parliamentarian, told AFP. "There is no room for hatred, anger, discrimination or sectarianism."

Meanwhile, the Arab world has looked to laughter to counter the worst of the fear and speculation swirling around the coronavirus pandemic. Among the treatments are a TV show starring coronavirus as guest of honor, a parody COVID-19 Twitter account, and song and dance designed to lampoon

rials (\$63-\$127) with the government subsidizing part of their payment.

Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock will shut their doors until further notice, religious authorities said yesterday, in a move to protect worshippers at Islam's third holiest site. Prayers will still be held on the huge open area around the two shrines and other Muslim prayer sites on the sacred compound known to Muslims worldwide as Al-Haram Al-Sharif, or The Noble Sanctuary.

"The Islamic Waqf department decided to shut down the enclosed prayer places inside the blessed Aqsa Mosque, and until further notice, as a protective measure to prevent the spread of coronavirus," Sheikh Omar Al-Kiswani, the Director of Al-Aqsa Mosque, told Reuters. "All prayers will be held in the courtyards of Al-Aqsa mosque and doors will remain open to all worshippers," he added.

Al-Aqsa Mosque was built in the 8th century and Muslims regard it as next only to Makkah and Madinah in importance. The latest measure follows a series of ever-stricter restrictions imposed by political and religious authorities in the Holy Land to contain the spread of coronavirus. Israel's Chief Rabbinate said last week that Jewish worshippers should not come to the Western Wall or pray en masse there. The wall was built by Herod the Great as a restraining wall for the compound housing the Jewish temples of antiquity and is a sacred place of prayer for Jews.

Jerusalem's Old City is sacred to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three great monotheistic faiths. Christians revere it as the place where they believe that Jesus Christ preached, died and was resurrected, and the Holy Land church authorities have changed some worship practices to protect mass celebrants. — AFP

the panic over the illness. From Egypt to Iraq and the Gulf to Tunisia, satirical hot takes have spread almost as fast as the virus across a region where authorities have resorted to increasingly draconian containment measures.

"What do you say to all the people who are scared of you?" an Egyptian television presenter asked an actor wearing a green virus costume. "Wash your hands and sneeze away from others!" commands the character with a grotesque green face mask studded with spikes to mimic the coronavirus cell. On Al-Hayah, a popular commercial channel, the coronavirus complains of "unjust treatment" because of widespread "exaggeration", accusing social media of hyping the epidemic's severity and calling on viewers to follow basic hygiene rules. "Stay clean, is it that hard?" he asked with a broad Egyptian accent. The interview, described by the host as "extraordinary", has spread like wildfire on Arabic social media.

Online in the Arab world, the new coronavirus has spawned social media parodies harnessing pop-culture GIFs and memes to prick po-faced attitudes to the outbreak. One such Twitter account has gone viral, attracting over 60,000 followers. "The new coronavirus denies rumors concerning the existence of a health ministry in Egypt," said one tweet earlier this month at which point the authorities had yet to report a confirmed case, raising questions about their transparency.

A video of "Masks, we don't have them" sung in an Iraqi dialect has also swept the web. The singers berate the dearth of masks in the country where the price of those that are available has shot up. Lebanese and Jordanians sporting scrubs and masks have also taken to singing to break the tension caused by virus fears. In North Africa, a young Tunisian has written a song with a message - featuring harmonized hygiene tips. In a calm voice set to guitar music, the singer intones the "necessity of masks and disinfectant gel".

In the Arab world, sarcastic or good-natured humor can sometimes stray into what might be considered racist territory. On one YouTube channel, an Egyptian "electro-shaabi" singer has racked up 3.5 million views of a clip in which he wonders aloud over popular street music why the Chinese eat bats and dogs. Saudi oil giant Aramco faced racism allegations online after a photo emerged of a South Asian man wearing a hand sanitizer dispensing sandwich board, apparently at one of the company's sites. Aramco distanced itself from the images.

In the neighboring United Arab Emirates, police have warned that making jokes or spreading rumors about the virus could lead to legal action, a pro-government newspaper reported. But in Kuwait, where authorities have enforced some of the strictest containment measures including the suspension of all inbound and outbound passenger flights, keyboard warriors have delighted in creating and sharing memes referencing dystopian sci-fi films. — AFP

Classifieds

Monday, March 16, 2020

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 e-mail: info@kuwaittimes.net

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Rhys Fernandes, holder of Indian Passport No. P6273566, having permanent address at Janata Colony, Room No. 58, Worli Village, Mumbai 400 030, Maharashtra, India, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth by name will be read as under Given name: Rhys Surname: Fernandes. (C 5706)

I, Rick Fernandes, holder of Indian Passport No. S9736849, having permanent address at Janata Colony, Room No. 58, Worli Village, Mumbai 400 030, Maharashtra, India, residing in Kuwait at present, here-

by declare that henceforth by name will be read as under Given name: Rick Surname: Fernandes Name of Father: Joseph Lawrence Fernandes (PP no. U0464436) Name of Mother: Angelina Regina Fernandes (PP no. Z2110343). (C 5706)

Juan Jeevan holder of Indian Passport No: S4699802 resident at Salmiya block 12, building No: 33, need to split my name, Surname - Jeevan, Given name - Juan. (C 5707)

Juana Jeevan holder of Indian Passport No: S4699793 resident at Salmiya, Block 12, Building No: 33 need to split my name, Surname - Jeevan, Given name - Juana. (C 5707 11-3-2020)

I, HUSSAINI DAMORAWALA holder of Indian Passport No. Z5185481 & Civil ID No. 271050701299 has changed my name from HUSSAINI DAMORAWALA to HUSSAINI (Given Name) and BAMBORA (Surname) hereinafter in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by name of HUSSAINI BAMBORA.

REQUIRED For a commercial organization

Seller- Cashier -Worker
 Light transport driver

Applicant should have valid driving licence

50706117

Daily SuDoku

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hard

Thursday's Solution

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very hard

STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

Go ahead and make a list today, Aries. Powerful emotions are likely to lure you from your current path unless you have some sort of concrete plan to fall back on. Put idle hands to use by delegating tasks to the people around you. You'll be amazed at the little blocks of time you have when you stay on task and keep yourself and everyone else around you in motion.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

Make the effort to get to a body of water today, Libra. Whether it's the ocean, a river, or lake, the sense of expansion and comfort that you'll find there will be extremely healing. Know that you are the greatest healer you have for yourself and that you have incredible power to share this gift with others, too. Augment this healing energy with a return to nature.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

If you look carefully today, Taurus, you're apt to notice aspects of people that you never noticed before. There could be a frenzy of activity that catches you in its net and takes you away. Look to other people for guidance as you go along. When you ask for help, you'll get it. At the same time, you'll learn a great deal about the people who end up helping you.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

You may find it hard to connect with your emotions today, Scorpio. It could be that it's difficult to find a bit of quiet time when you can really sit down and listen to your inner voice. There are distractions all around that are pulling you in many different directions. Keep in mind that these forces aren't necessarily acting in your best interests.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Be careful about becoming too stubborn today, Gemini. This is one of those days in which you're asked to build a structure in a very windy area. If you insist on using the most rigid materials, you'll find that the structure you build ends up snapping in two. If, however, you construct your building with flexible materials, it will bend in the wind and last far longer.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

You may find that your heart is bouncing back and forth like a tennis ball today, Sagittarius. One minute you could be drawn one way, while the next minute you're drawn in a completely different direction. Instead of trying to fight this feeling, take advantage of it. Consciously or unconsciously, what you're really doing is exploring.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

It's a good thing you have a flexible attitude, Cancer, especially today. Your adaptive powers could be put to the test as you find yourself surrounded by fickle emotions and stubborn attitudes. Don't get too hung up on getting straight answers from people today, for they're apt to be just as confused as you about certain issues. Play it cool for now and ride the waves easily to shore.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Your energy level is high today, Capricorn, but don't let this turn into a head-in-the-clouds attitude. Keep one foot firmly planted on the ground, because you may need to keep a level head in a work or personal situation. Keep in mind that the best way to deal with this is to use your positive energy to heal the difficult situation instead of letting this difficult situation get you down.



Leo (July 23-August 22)

You could be frustrated by others' lack of commitment today, Leo. You could try to make plans with people but they keep changing their minds about what they want to do. Perhaps they're emotionally insecure and afraid to take the next step. Don't let other people hold you back. Make plans and stick to them. Other people will fall into place accordingly.



Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

You could think that your life is too boring for anyone else to care about, Aquarius. Don't fall into a well of self-pity and convince yourself that there simply isn't enough excitement in your life and never will be. Believe that you have the power to cure any such downtrodden feeling that you might have at this time. Consider joining a spiritual support group where you can honestly share your feelings.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

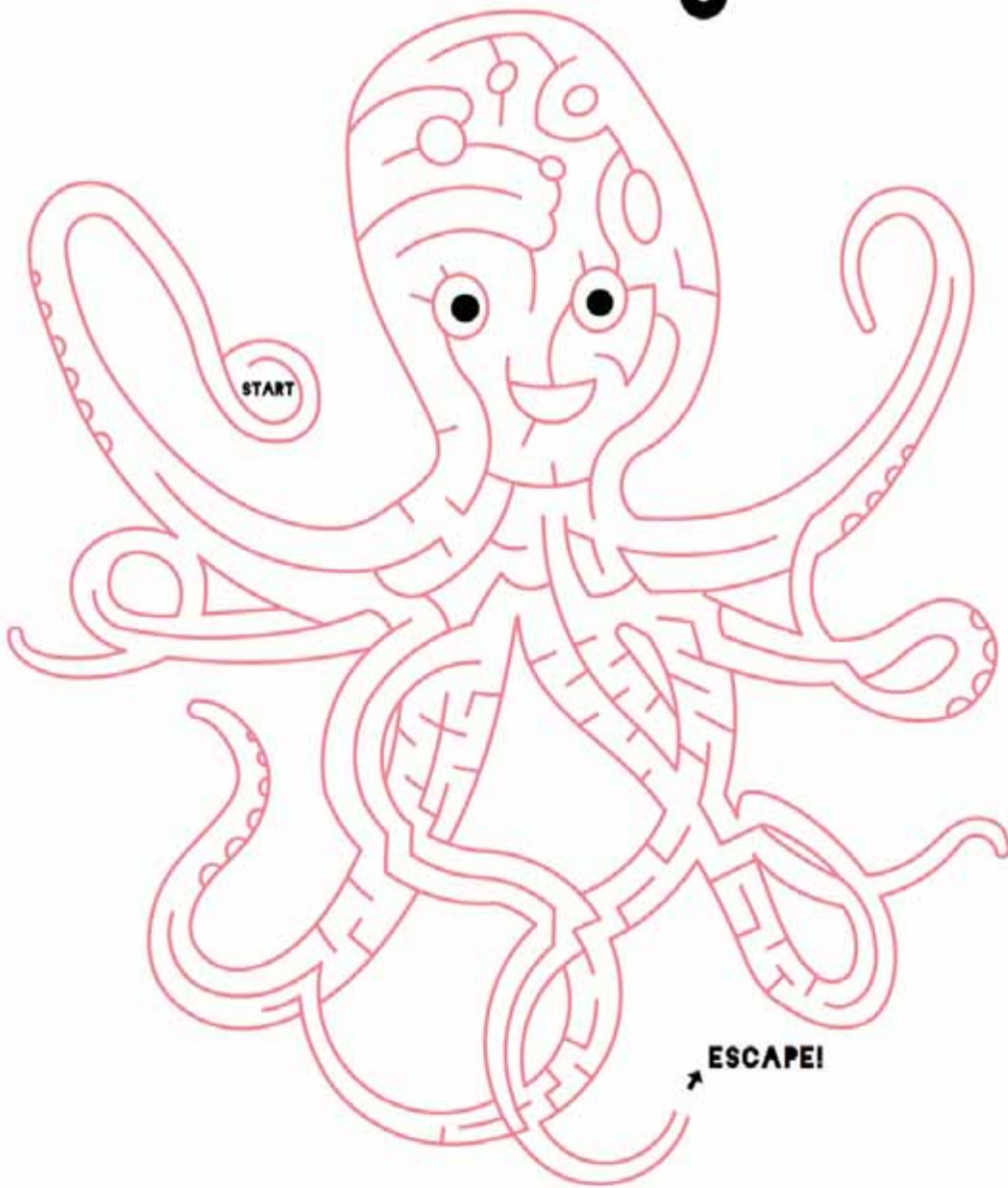
You should be feeling emotionally strong today, Virgo, although you could find that an idea runs through your head that asks you to slow down and take things once step at a time. The internal dialogue could drive you crazy if you aren't careful. The most important thing to do now is simply follow your heart. Do what you love to do, and associate with the people you love and respect the most.



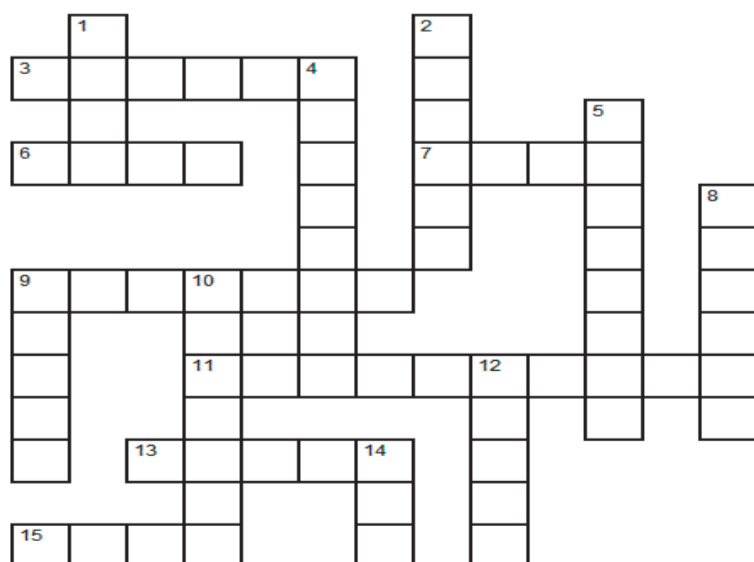
Pisces (February 19-March 20)

In an effort to be the brightest and best star on the stage, Pisces, you might actually be driving away the most important members of your audience. Make sure that you aren't putting on different masks with different people just so you can appease those you're with. Others can see right through any disguise you try to put on. Trying to deceive others is simply a sign of disrespect.

OCTOPUS

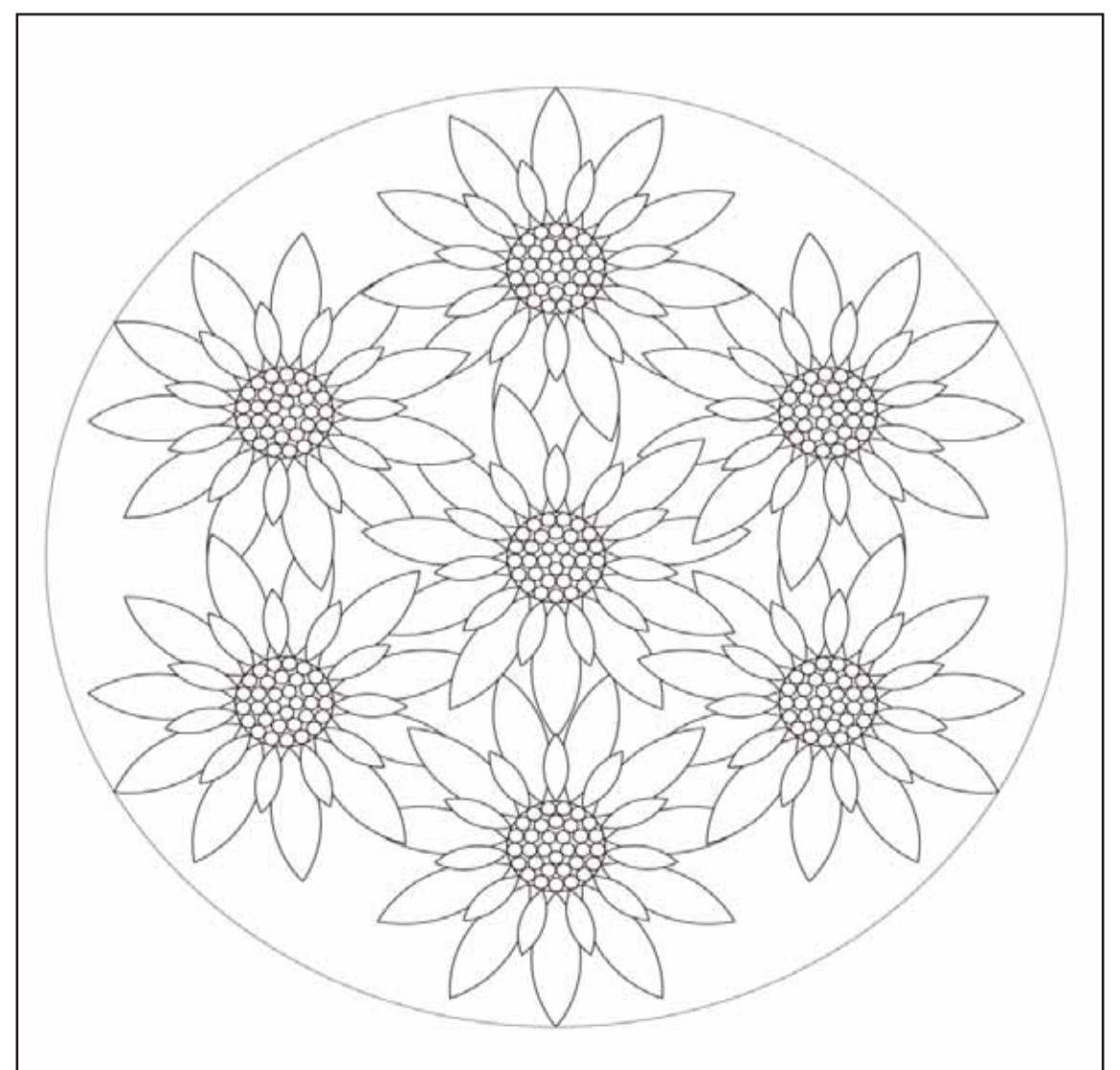


VOLCANOES



- ACROSS**
- layer of the earth under the crust
 - planet with the largest known volcano
 - center of the earth
 - passage followed by magma
 - area in the Pacific Ocean with lots of volcanic activity
 - melted rock inside of the earth
 - crack in the earth's crust where volcanic material escapes

- DOWN**
- melted rock that comes out of a volcano
 - Roman god for whom volcanoes are named
 - ejection of solid, liquid and gas from a volcano
 - the earth's crust is divided into _____ plates
 - tall column of water and steam erupting from the earth's surface
 - top layer of the earth
 - volcano that is currently inactive but may erupt in the future
 - side of a volcano
 - fine particles of rock dust from an erupting volcano



Sports

Mapimpi seals 24-14 Super Rugby victory for table-topping Sharks

Super Rugby suspended after this weekend due to coronavirus

DURBAN: A try by Rugby World Cup winner Makazole Mapimpi sealed a 24-14 Super Rugby victory for the table-topping Coastal Sharks over the Western Stormers on Saturday in a South African showdown. His score one minute from time followed two penalties by fly-half Curwin Bosch that turned a 14-13 deficit on 69 minutes into a 10-point triumph at Kings Park in Durban.

It was the last match in the southern hemisphere competition to be played in the republic for the "foreseeable future" because of the coronavirus pandemic, the organisers said. The SANZAAR announcement came just 80 minutes before the kick-off and many players were unaware that Super Rugby will be suspended after round seven.

"I am not surprised by the suspension given the spread of the virus and just hope the break is not too long," said Sharks skipper and centre Lukhanyo Am. "Our forwards won this match and the goal-kicking of Curwin (Bosch) contributed a lot to the victory."

Stormers prop and captain Steven Kitshoff said the match was a "wonderful advertisement for South African rugby in front of a great crowd". "Both sides pitched up and we had a typical South African derby — very physical with possession fiercely contested.

"The suspension is unfortunate but understandable because the good health of people has to come before sport. Let us hope the break is short."

STORMERS' DISASTROUS START

Sharks went back to the top of the combined table with 24 points after a fifth consecutive win, one point above the Canterbury Crusaders, the defending champions. The Stormers, the pacesetters for four rounds, slipped to seventh on 17 points, behind the Wellington Hurricanes on points difference.

They made a disastrous start with flanker Johan du Toit yellow-carded after 12 seconds for a dangerous tackle on Sharks scrum-half Louis Schreuder, who had to go off injured. But the hosts did not capitalise on their 10-minute numerical advantage and only scored well into the first half when full-back Apelele Fassi went over for a try

that Bosch converted.

The Stormers responded almost immediately with scrum-half Herschel Jantjies scoring a try that full-back Damian Willemse converted. A Bosch drop-goal in additional first-half time earned the Sharks a 10-7 half-time lead they deserved given their edge in the set-pieces and aggression at the breakdowns.

Bosch widened the lead to six points with a penalty before the home crowd were silenced by a try from substitute scrum-half Paul de Wet that Willemse converted to put the Stormers ahead. But with a surprise win looming for a visiting team lacking injured Springbok forwards Siya Kolisi, Pieter-Steph du Toit and Bongani Mbonambi, Bosch and Mapimpi struck decisive blows.

Meanwhile, Super Rugby, the southern hemisphere's premier rugby union club competition, is suspending its season after this weekend's games due to the coronavirus pandemic, the organisers said Saturday.

Organisers SANZAAR said they had "no option but to suspend the 2020 Super Rugby tournament at the conclusion of this weekend's matches for the foreseeable future".

SANZAAR said it had taken its decision after the New Zealand government announced that all returning travellers, including Super Rugby players, will have to self-isolate for 14 days. Five New Zealand teams, including reigning champions Canterbury Crusaders, play in the 15-team tournament which also includes clubs from Australia, South Africa and Argentina.

Crusaders played Saturday and went temporarily top of the table after securing a 49-14 bonus point win over the Tokyo Sunwolves in Brisbane. The Canterbury-based side will be able to return home to New Zealand before the midnight Sunday deadline.

"SANZAAR completely understands the directive issued by the New Zealand Government given concerns globally over the COVID-19 virus and the primary aim to reduce exposure and spread of the virus," the organisers said.

Saturday's game between Jaguares of Argentina and New Zealand side Highlanders in Buenos Aires



DURBAN: Sharks' center Andre Esterhuizen (C) is tackled by Stormers Juarno Augustus (L) and Scarra Ntobeni during the Super Rugby match between the Sharks of Durban and the Stormers of Cape Town held at the Kings Park stadium in Durban. —AFP

was cancelled just hours before the 2300 GMT kick-off. The match, which was due to be held behind closed doors, was called off to enable the Highlanders to return to New Zealand before the Sunday midnight deadline.

SANZAAR chief executive Andy Marinos said "our priority is to ensure the players currently overseas return home healthy and safely to be with their families". He said SANZAAR had not taken the decision to call off the game lightly, but the welfare of players and team management was "paramount".

Under the rules a match cancelled in these circumstances is officially declared a draw with both Jaguares and Highlanders receiving two points apiece.

Sunday's all-Australian match between ACT Brumbies and NSW Waratahs at 0505 GMT will now be the last game to go ahead before the suspension comes into place. The tournament was already facing obstacles with fans barred not only from the game in Argentina but also Australia from next weekend.

'UNFORTUNATE BUT UNDERSTANDABLE'

Next weekend, the Auckland Blues were sched-

uled to play ACT Brumbies at home, with New Zealand club Waikato Chiefs in the South African city of Durban to play the Coastal Sharks.

Sharks displaced Crusaders at the top of the table after sealing a 24-14 victory over the Western Stormers in Saturday's South African showdown in Durban.

The SANZAAR announcement to suspend the competition after round seven had come just 80 minutes before the kick-off at Kings Park.

"I am not surprised by the suspension given the spread of the virus and just hope the break is not too long," said Sharks skipper and centre Lukhanyo Am.

Stormers prop and captain Steven Kitshoff commented: "The suspension is unfortunate but understandable because the good health of people has to come before sport. Let us hope the break is short."

The coronavirus pandemic has rocked world sport. Football leagues have been suspended across the globe and cricket has been deeply affected with England's tour of Sri Lanka abandoned and the lucrative Indian Premier League announcing it will suspend play from March 29 to April 15. —AFP

India duo ready to put Olympic dream ahead of coronavirus concerns

NEW DELHI: Indian shooter Mairaj Ahmad Khan and javelin thrower Shivpal Singh say competing at this summer's Tokyo Olympics is their top priority despite concerns about the health risks to athletes from the coronavirus outbreak.

The number of coronavirus infections in Japan rose to 1,484 yesterday, increasing by a faster pace than the previous day, public broadcaster NHK reported. More than 150,000 people have been infected around the world and 5,800 have died, according to a Reuters tally. The outbreak has brought elite-level sport to a standstill and sparked fears that the 2020 Olympics may have to be postponed or cancelled.

However, skeet shooter Khan says he would ignore the risks to have a shot at Olympic gold.

"If the Olympics were to be held now, despite the health risk that the coronavirus poses, I would go and compete without even thinking about the consequences," Khan told Sunday's edition of the Indian Express newspaper.

"... it's my dream and I can put my life on the line to win an Olympic medal." Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Saturday the country was still preparing to host the Olympics while Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike vowed to take thorough measures against the outbreak.

There has also been suggestions that the Games could take place without spectators. "Personally, I don't mind that," said Khan, who earned his spot at the Olympics by winning a silver medal at the Asian Championship in Doha last year.

"My dream is to win an Olympic medal and ultimately you will be called an Olympic champion; no one will bother or care to remember if it was behind closed doors."

Singh, who booked his Tokyo ticket at a meet in South Africa on Tuesday, says athletes are trained to get over setbacks but missing out on the Olympics would be on another level.

"... athletes are taught to brush off disappointments and move forward. But this is not just another tournament," the 24-year-old told the newspaper. "I will definitely pack my bags for Tokyo if the event happens, whether risky or not."

"It's a dream for every athlete to be at the biggest sporting stage in the world. It's my desire to do well at the Games and until then I won't rest in peace." —Reuters

Biles takes aim at USA Gymnastics in birthday tweet

LOS ANGELES: Four-time Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles wants more than good wishes from USA Gymnastics. The US federation wished Biles a happy 23rd birthday on social media on Saturday.

Biles — who also owns 19 world titles and is expected to be among the stars of the Tokyo Olympics — used their tweet as a chance to demand an independent investigation into the Larry Nassar sex abuse scandal.

"how about you amaze me and do the right thing ... have an independent investigation," Biles snapped on Twitter after the federation's birthday tweet.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY to the most decorated gymnast of all time, @simonebiles!" USA Gymnastics wrote, posting a video of Biles in action in a floor exercise. "We know you will only

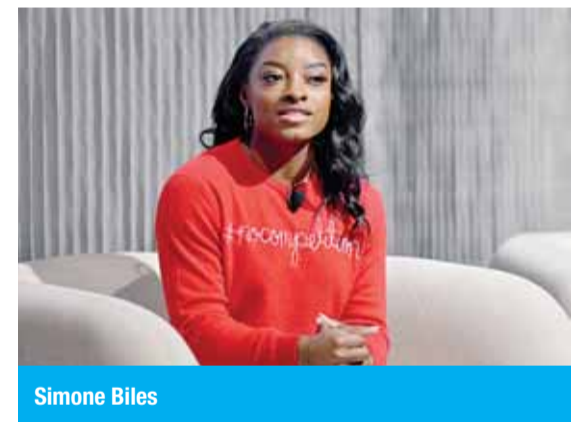
continue to amaze us and make history!"

Former national gymnastics team doctor Nassar was jailed for life for abusing more than 250 athletes, including stars of the United States' 2012 and 2016 gold medal-winning Olympic teams.

A US Senate investigation found that "multiple institutions" failed to adequately respond to credible allegations against Nassar, but Biles has said that USA Gymnastics and the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee still owe his victims, including herself, more answers and a framework to ensure such abuses won't occur again.

"Wish they BOTH wanted an independent investigation as much as the survivors & I do," she tweeted earlier this month. As Biles and other elite gymnasts ramp up their preparations for Tokyo, USA Gymnastics in January offered a \$215 million (194 million euros) settlement to victims of Nassar to settle legal claims — a plan a lawyer for more than 200 women called "unconscionable."

Olympic gold medalist Aly Raisman, who is now retired, called the settlement offer "offensive" and accused the federation of attempting to prevent release of details which would show how Nassar



Simone Biles

was able to abuse athletes for years.

Attorney John Manley, who represents more than 180 clients with active claims against USA Gymnastics, said the settlement offer releases too many people from further claims, including the USOPC, former USA Gymnastics chief Steve Penny and former national team directors Bela and Marta Karolyi. —AFP

Brumbies crush Tahs in final game before shutdown

CANBERRA: A rampant ACT Brumbies thrashed the NSW Waratahs 47-14 yesterday in the final Super Rugby game for the foreseeable future, with the season now suspended because of the coronavirus.

A decision to halt the southern hemisphere club championship, which features 15 teams from five countries, was made on Saturday after New Zealand said all inbound travellers must self-isolate for 14 days.

Australia introduced similar measures an hour before the Brumbies and Waratahs kicked off in Canberra. The Waratahs had lost four of their previous five matches, including a woeful capitulation against the Waikato Chiefs a week ago when they conceded six second-half tries.

They cut down on handling errors and turnovers, but the fragile Waratahs defence was exposed again as the Brumbies scored seven tries to two. "We've got a strong leadership group, a strong playing group and that's what we pride ourselves on," said Brumbies vice captain Tom Cusack, who admitted he did not know what would happen with the season going into lockdown.

"It's one of those things that you can't control," he said. "It's going to

be interesting to see how the game progresses over the next couple of weeks." The Waratahs led with a converted try after dependable captain Rob Simmons stretched out an arm to score after Jack Dempsey pounced on a loose ball.

But the lead didn't last with winger Solomon Kata scoring off the back of a powerful Brumbies driving maul to make it 7-7. Tries in quick succession for the Waratahs' Mark Nawaqanitawase and a second for Kata kept maintained parity but the Brumbies went to the break 21-14 in front after Cadeyrn Neville drove over.

Joe Powell burst through to extend their lead early in the second period after Wallabies back Kurtley Beale pulled a hamstring as he tried to chase him down. The Tahs' were finally overwhelmed after Dempsey's sin bin for dangerous play midway through the second half, with Tom Wright bagging a double and Tom Banks getting the Brumbies' seventh try after the siren.

"I don't think the scoreboard showed the effort we put in," said Simmons. "We challenged them well but they just showed what a well-oiled machine they are." With the season halted after round seven, South Africa's Coastal Sharks top the overall table, but have played a game more than the second-placed Brumbies who are a point behind and level with the defending champions, Canterbury Crusaders. —AFP

Abe pledges Olympics to go ahead

TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe resisted pressure for changes to the Tokyo Olympics schedule even as sporting events worldwide fall victim to the coronavirus pandemic. Abe pledged Japan would host the Games as planned in July and said he had no immediate intention to declare a state of emergency over the virus outbreak, which has now seen more than 140,000 people infected across the globe and over 5,400 killed.

His comments come two days after US President Donald Trump suggested the Japanese capital postpone the Games for a year as the spread of the virus wreaks havoc on the sporting calendar.

"We will respond by closely coordinating with officials concerned, including the IOC (International Olympic Committee). There is no change in this," Abe told a news conference. "We want to hold the Olympics as planned without any trouble by overcoming the spread of infections," he said.

Organisers, Japanese government officials and the IOC have insisted preparations are on track and there will be no postponement or cancella-

tion. England's football Premier League, America's NBA basketball season and the Augusta Masters golf major are just some of the competitions suspended because of the pandemic. On Friday, Abe and Trump spoke on the phone about the outbreak and Olympics after Trump proposed a delay. "We agreed that Japan and the US will cooperate and closely coordinate for success in the Olympics," Abe said, adding they had not discussed any postponement.

The Japanese parliament on Friday approved legislation that gives Abe the power to declare a state of emergency to combat COVID-19 but Abe insisted such a declaration was not yet necessary. The coronavirus has infected more than 700 people across Japan and been linked to 21 deaths. Separately, 700 people on board a cruise ship that docked near Tokyo last month were also infected.

A state of emergency would allow local governments to require that people stay indoors, schools close and public facilities limit use. Land and buildings could be requisitioned for makeshift hospitals.

IOC chief Thomas Bach told German television broadcaster ARD on Thursday that the body would follow recommendations by the World Health Organization but that work continued for a successful Games.

He acknowledged however that cancellations of Olympic qualifiers are starting to pose "serious problems". —AFP

Sports

Oliveira wins in eerie silence as UFC Brasilia defies virus fears

Watched only by coaches, officials and production staff

BRASILIA: The sporting calendar took a serious beating this week with few events surviving the world's battle to contain the coronavirus, and even though Saturday's UFC mixed martial arts event in Brazil still went ahead, it was against a backdrop of eerie silence in an empty arena.

In the main event, underdog Charles Oliveira from Sao Paulo scored a shock submission win over Kevin Lee with a guillotine choke that would have taken the roof of the Ginasio Nilson Nelson Arena, if there had been anybody there to see it.

With the local government having banned large gatherings in an effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the usual gladiatorial atmosphere of a fight night was absent as the thousands of seats remained unfilled.

Watched only by the coaches, the officials and the production staff, Sweden's Beia Malecki and Veronica Macedo of Venezuela were the first to make the walk to the octagon. The usual thundering intro music for each fighter was cut short: with no fans, there was no atmosphere of anticipation to build.

Octagon announcer Joe Martinez did his best to inject some life into the proceedings as he introduced the fighters, but his fairground-style announcements

of each fighter were met with indifference from those in the arena, who all had other work to do.

The only sounds were the slap of leather on flesh, feet pounding off the octagon floor and the odd grunt punctuating the grappling exchanges. Occasionally the sounds of combat were pierced by the shouts of coaches and corner personnel.

The bouts themselves lacked nothing in intensity but, without the electricity generated by a live audience, they took on the feel of glorified sparring sessions, and as the victors had their hands raised there were no roars of appreciation to reward them.

The first nine fights on the 12-fight card all went the distance before Renato Moicano finally got a win inside the allotted time with a submission victory over Damir Hadzovic, and Gilbert Burns then added a thunderous

knockout of Demian Maia in the co-main event, his full-throated victory roars echoing through the empty hall.

The lack of atmosphere clearly affected some of the fighters, who are more used to battling in front of sold-out arenas full of enthusiastic supporters.

"It was a bit weird not having any fans in the arena, but I could hear everything my coaches were saying,



Charles Oliveira and Kevin Lee fight in action.

so that was good," Beia Malecki told reporters after scoring a decision victory in the first fight of the night.

"Sometimes it's so loud in there. It's been a crazy week; we did not know if it (the fight) was going to happen or not, but we stuck to the plan," she added. With

the government in the United Kingdom said to be considering a ban on large gatherings, the UFC's next event in London next weekend may yet be cancelled. That may be a better fate than forcing their gladiators to fight in another empty colosseum. — Reuters

“

It's been a crazy week

”

Liverpool left to wait and wonder after virus strikes

LONDON: Liverpool could have been crowned Premier League champions today for the first time in a generation. Instead the stadium will be silent and the streets empty. Jurgen Klopp's team needed Manchester City to lose to Burnley on Saturday to give them a chance to seal the deal at their local rivals Everton two days later.

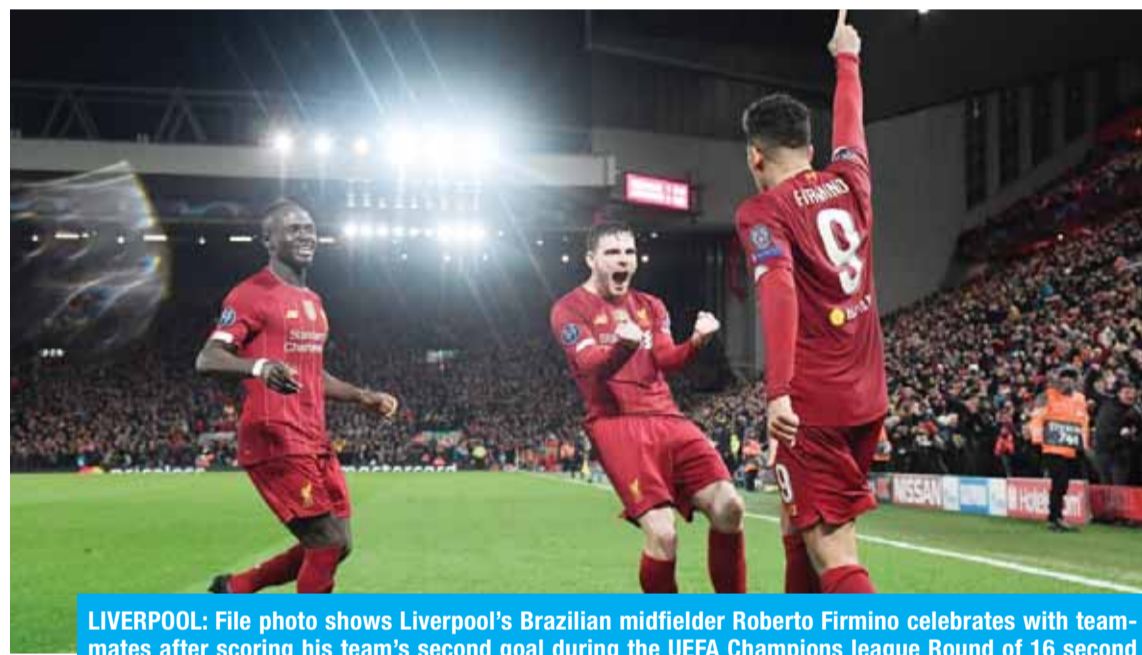
Regardless of whether it would have happened at Goodison Park or over the coming weeks, their first top-flight title for 30 years was a mere formality. But now fans are wondering when, or even if, they will be crowned champions after the coronavirus laid waste to the global sporting calendar.

The message coming from Liverpool is that there are more important issues than football to talk about, even with the club tantalisingly close to glory. "I've said before that football always seems the most important of the least important things," Klopp said in a statement on Friday.

"Today, football and football matches really aren't important at all. "If it's a choice between football and the good of the wider society, it's no contest. Really, it isn't." Klopp's stance won him the support of World Health Organisation chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who thanked him for his "powerful message".

Liverpool supporters, desperate to reclaim their position at the pinnacle of the English game, agree with their German manager, saying the pandemic overshadows football. Supporters' union Spirit of Shankly is focusing on the damaging fallout from the COVID-19 virus.

"In talks with @lfc we asked for assurances that



LIVERPOOL: File photo shows Liverpool's Brazilian midfielder Roberto Firmino celebrates with teammates after scoring his team's second goal during the UEFA Champions League Round of 16 second leg football match between Liverpool and Atletico Madrid at Anfield. — AFP

non-playing staff will not lose their pay as a consequence of shifts being cancelled," it said in a statement. "We also need to keep in mind those most vulnerable. Cancelling football games means (food-banks) will be hit hard."

DESERVING WINNERS

Liverpool have stumbled in recent weeks, knocked out of the Champions League by Atletico Madrid and dumped out of the FA Cup by Chelsea. But they have been peerless in the Premier League, leaving their rivals in their wake to race 25 points clear of defending champions Manchester City.

With Alisson Becker in goal, Virgil van Dijk marshalling the defence and their devastating front three

of Roberto Firmino, Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane, Klopp's men have been irresistible.

Paul Hayward, writing in the Daily Telegraph, said Liverpool should be crowned champions for the 19th time even if no more games are played. "If a season ends too soon, its natural winning line is the point it reached before the halt was called: emphatically so, 29 games into a 38-match campaign, which is a respectable distance," he wrote.

"Voiding" the 2019/20 football season would be nonsense," he added. "Handing over the trophy at any point where clubs were forced to give up would feel morally correct." Brighton and Hove Albion chief executive Paul Barber said if the season were to be "frozen" it would be unjust on Liverpool. — AFP

but said he had practiced 'social distancing' at the match. "I've read the government advice so I have tried to put myself with empty seats around me and I moved once," he said.

FOOD OUTLETS

At one of the few matches to take place in London, Dulwich Hamlet took on Hemel Hempstead in the sixth-tier National League South. The only references to the pandemic were the by-now familiar non-handshaking pre-match team greeting and a PA announcement saying there was no guarantee next week's match at St Albans City would go ahead "in these difficult times" - but that the beer and food outlets would be open all afternoon. "I'm more worried about us going down than I am about catching this bloody bug," said 75-year-old Archie Harrison, adding that he had supported Hamlet since 1964. "The trouble is, I can't do anything about stopping either."

A good crowd of around 1,400 turned up at Dartford's modern and well-equipped Princes Park to watch their side take on Chelmsford City in something of a Kent-Essex derby in the National League South.

Regulars said there might have been a few outside fans in attendance too but the crowd was about average. "Maybe there are some fans of Premier League and EFL clubs who are kicking their heels and want to see some football but then others might be worried by the spread of the virus and not come out of their houses," said Dartford vice-chairman Dave Skinner.

Dartford ran out 3-0 winners to keep alive their prospects of promotion to the National League, although whether or not that challenge will come to fruition is out of their hands.

A meeting of the National League takes place on Monday, after the British government meets again to discuss banning mass gatherings. The prospect of a lengthy stop concerns club officials across the non-league pyramid.

"It could be terminal really. We rely on gate receipts. If the games are abandoned for the rest of the season many of the clubs at our level will go to the wall. Most clubs like us are run on a shoestring," said Skinner. —Reuters

England's lower clubs enjoy spotlight after virus fears shut down top leagues

HALIFAX/DARTFORD: England's Premier League and 72-team Football League closed down on Saturday due to concerns over the coronavirus but clubs in the fifth tier and below defiantly took to the field — to the delight of football addicts across the country.

But while fans made the most of what may have been the final games for several weeks, club officials were facing up to the financial damage that could be on the horizon if they too are forced to stop playing.

A crowd of 2,154 turned out in West Yorkshire to see Halifax Town lose 1-0 at home to Ebbsfleet United and, while that attendance was not much bigger than expected, there were several supporters of Premier and Football League clubs who had travelled to get their fix.

One Ebbsfleet fan, who had made the four-hour trip from Kent, watched the first half of the game in a gas mask but removed it at the interval to eat a pie.

Several clubs, such as Halifax, offered fans of other clubs a discounted ticket of 10 pounds (\$12.27) and Manchester City season-ticket holder David Miller took full advantage of the offer, attending two games in one day.

"I was at Bradford Park Avenue earlier for the 3pm kick-off in the National League North and then came to this one," he said. "I'm not worried about coming to football matches". Wigan Athletic supporter Nathan Sinclair, who had planned to see his club play at nearby Huddersfield in the second-tier Championship, said he simply wanted to watch some football while he could.

"I have a feeling this might be the last football match that takes place in the country for a good while," he said. Sinclair said his wife had decided against coming to the game due to concerns about catching the virus

Russo's bid for Olympics fades in his hotel room

LONDON: Italian super-heavyweight Clemente Russo, a double Olympic silver medalist, blamed digestive problems for a no-show in his Tokyo 2020 qualifying bout with Britain's Frazer Clarke on Saturday.

The 37-year-old two-times world champion, seeking to fight at a fifth Games, told his 130,000 followers on Instagram that 'bad digestion' had kept him stuck in his room for the past 24 hours.

"I've tried to train, I've tried to react but I am somewhat weakened and they will not let me fight," said Russo, whose coach cited an abdominal problem, according to the event organisers.

The sparsely-attended qualifying tournament at London's Copper Box involves 342 male and female boxers from 43 countries and is one of few sporting events going ahead on a calendar ravaged by the coronavirus.

Italy is in lockdown as the European country worst hit by the fast-spreading virus but Russo and the Italian boxing team have been training in Britain for several weeks.

Russo said his dreams were not over, with one more European qualifying tournament scheduled for Paris from May 13-20. Whether that happens in the current climate remains to be seen, however.

"Today more than yesterday I am convinced I can do it, I am convinced I can once more take Italian pride, which at the moment is going through great difficulty, to the top," said the 2008 and 2012 silver medalist.

Clarke, a former sparring partner of professional heavyweight world champion Anthony Joshua, was given a walkover.

The 28-year-old is making his third attempt to qualify for a Games after losing out to eventual gold medalist Joshua in 2012 and Joe Joyce in 2016.

A BOY CALLED COLIN

British lightweight Caroline Dubois, a junior world and Olympic champion who started in boxing pretending to be a boy called Colin, won her first senior fight by outpointing Ala Staradub of Belarus.

The 19-year-old, whose 10 siblings include unbeaten professional heavyweight Daniel Dubois, next fights 2016 Olympic bronze medalist and top seed Mira Potkonen.

The Finn, a 39-year-old mother of two who sparred with Dubois at a training camp in Colorado in January, has a bye to the second round.

"It was an alright fight, I'll give it a C, I could have done a lot better but obviously there was a lot of pressure that was built up," said Dubois of her debut.

"Even though Mira is number one seed, she has only got two hands, two legs and one brain. If I can't beat her, I can't ever say I will be the best."

The Briton started boxing at nine, following her brother to Repton amateur boxing club, but had to hide her gender. "Back then most boxing clubs in England didn't really approve of female boxing," she told Reuters. "Repton at the time didn't allow female boxers so I had to say I was Colin."

The subterfuge lasted for months until she had to get a medical for her first real bout. "It was funny because whenever my dad used to call me, he wasn't very good at it and would always say 'Caroline' and nobody else picked up on it," she added. "Some people did actually say 'that boy, he looks like a girl' but everyone else just turned a blind eye." — Reuters

IPL cricket season will be shortened

MUMBAI: India's cricket board chief Sourav Ganguly said Saturday the Indian Premier League will be truncated with the Twenty20 tournament pushed back due to the coronavirus pandemic. The world's richest cricket league was postponed Friday, meaning instead of starting on March 29, it will begin on April 15 at the earliest after the Indian government ordered measures against travel and public gatherings.

Top officials of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) met franchise owners of the eight IPL teams in Mumbai to assess the situation. "Safety is most important for the players and at the moment (with) what's going around in the world and India with the government directives this is all we can do. We have postponed remaining domestic matches," Ganguly told reporters.

"If it (IPL) is (postponed till) April 15, then, in any case 15 days are gone, it has to be a truncated one. How truncated, how many games, I can't say at the moment." While the country of 1.3 billion has reported just two deaths from coronavirus and more than 80 confirmed cases, all sporting activities have been suspended. — AFP



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE		
Everton FC v Liverpool	beIN Sports	23:00
GERMAN BUNDESLIGA		
SV Werder Bremen v Bayer 04 Leverkusen	beIN Sports	22:30

18 Mapimpi seals 24-14 Super Rugby victory for table-topping Sharks



18 Biles takes aim at USA Gymnastics in birthday tweet



19 Oliveira wins in eerie silence as UFC Brasilia defies virus fears



LEON: French driver Sebastien Ogier (3L) and his co-driver Julien Ingrassia (3R) of the Toyota Yaris WRT with their Sporting Director Kaj Lindström (C) flanked by Estonian driver Ott Tanak (2L) and his co-driver Martin Jarveoja (L) of Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC and Estonian rally driver Teemu Suninen (2R) and his co-driver Jarmo Lehtinen (R) of the Ford Fiesta WRT, celebrate on the podium of the FIA World Rally Championship in Leon, Guanajuato State, Mexico. — AFP

Ogier wins shortened Rally of Mexico

PARIS: French driver Sebastien Ogier said the Rally of Mexico should never have taken place after powering to a first win for his new team Toyota in Mexico.

The race was cut short by a day due to the coronavirus, but the rally winner himself said it should never have been raced at all given the circumstances. "Of course a win is a win," said Ogier, who led the championship standings after this third rally on the circuit.

"But respect for human life should be placed above all other things, and if we put our fans in danger, then a victory is worthless," said the 36-year-old who is a six-time world champion.

The racing yesterday should have comprised three specials, but the rally was terminated after the second full day, with Ogier 27 seconds ahead of de-

fending world champion Ott Tanak of Hyundai.

Tanak led the early action Friday before suffering a badly damaged suspension when hitting a rock that saw him drop from first to fourth in one of Saturday's early runs.

After a bad crash ruined his chances in Monte Carlo Tanak was furious with himself Sunday. "That accident was my fault, I take all the blame, we had everything in place to win before that," said the Estonian.

Welsh Toyota driver Elfyn Evans had a steady weekend coming fourth in his Toyota and dropping

from the top of the world championship standings to second some eight points behind Ogier.

The Toyota man praised his car's performance here in the dust and gravel after steering it to victory in the snow and cold at Sweden.

"The Yaris WRC felt good for our first rally on gravel," he said.

"Not an easy weekend, but fourth place after opening the road all of yesterday is not so bad," said the 31-year-old.

Finnish prodigy 19-year-old Kalle Rovanpera was again in the mix coming fourth in his Hyundai

after coming fifth at Monte Carlo and fourth at Sweden.

Otherwise, it was a weekend to forget for Hyundai as Spain's Dani Sordo overheated his engine and Belgian Thierry Neuville suffered an electrical problem.

"This was a tricky rally whichever way you look at it," said Hyundai team principal Andrea Adamo.

"We should have been up there because the car was performing better," he said. Even though Mexico has been little affected by coronavirus, the organisers and local government cut the final day's action on Saturday.

"This will allow teams and the media to return to their countries with the anticipation of the imminent closure of their borders because of COVID-19," said Mexico Rally director Patrick Suberville. — AFP

“Of course a win is a win”

Serie A doctors warn against return to training

ROME: Serie A doctors have issued a joint warning advising against a return to club training after four more players on Saturday tested positive for coronavirus, bringing the tally in the Italian top flight to 11.

Fiorentina's Patrick Cutrone and German Pezzella contracted the virus, the Tuscan club said, with Sampdoria's Fabio Depaoli and Bartosz Bereszynski later confirming they had also been diagnosed.

Serie A doctors said they had "strong concerns" and "unanimously advise not to resume training until a clear improvement" in the situation. Four Fiorentina team members were diagnosed with Serbia forward Dusan Vlahovic also testing positive on Friday, along with a club physiotherapist.

Seven Sampdoria players have tested positive, including Italian midfielder Depaoli and Polish defender Bereszynski on Saturday, along with Juventus defender Daniele Rugani this week. Vlahovic, 20, revealed that he had not realised anything was wrong until he became feverish and his temperature rose to 39 degrees, and he went to hospital.

"Anyway, I'm fine now," he said on Instagram. "What to do now? Nothing, just rest. I just have to stay away from people." Serie A as well as all sport in Italy has been suspended until April 3. But the Italian Players' Association (AIC) on Saturday slammed a "paradoxical situation" whereby pressure was being put on players by some clubs to return to training.

"Today in Italy there are still football clubs which are either shamefully irresponsible, or live on Mars, or lack a minimum of dignity," the AIC wrote.

On Saturday evening Italian authorities said 3,497 cases had been recorded in the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 21,157. The death toll now stands at 1,441, up from 1,266 on Friday.

Italy international Cutrone, 22, who joined Fiorentina on loan from Wolverhampton Wanderers last January, took to Instagram to reassure fans on his condition. "Thanks to all of you for the support and your messages of affection," the former AC Milan player said.

"I'm fine, and at this moment I stay at home following the protocol I received. I recommend you strictly observe the indications provided every day by the Institutions. #StrongerTogether #StayatHome Thank you, Patrick." Argentine Pezzella said earlier on Instagram: "The symptoms disappeared and I am at home following the procedures indicated by my club's medical staff. "This will certainly soon be just another story. Look after your health and that of those around you. Hugs." — AFP

Players treated like 'guinea pigs'

LONDON: Former Manchester United star Wayne Rooney claims the British government and football authorities have treated players like "guinea pigs" during the coronavirus crisis. While the rest of European football was shutting down due to the growing threat of the global pandemic, Rooney is angry it took several days for the Premier League and Football League to postpone their matches until April 3.

It was only when Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta and Chelsea winger Callum Hudson-Odoi tested positive for the virus on Friday that football's UK governing bodies called a temporary halt to the season.

Rooney, currently playing for second tier Derby, felt they should have acted quicker and the former England captain said he would "never forgive" the authorities if his family fell ill as a result. "Why did we wait until Friday? Why did it take Mikel Arteta to get ill for the game in England to do the right thing?" Rooney wrote in the Sunday Times.

"For players, staff and their families it has been a worrying week - one in which you felt a lack of leadership from the government and from the FA and Premier League. "After the emergency meeting, at last the right decision was made - until then it almost felt like foot-

ballers in England were being treated like guinea pigs.

"I know how I feel. If any of my family get infected through me because I've had to play when it's not safe, and they get seriously ill, I'd have to think hard about ever playing again. I would never forgive the authorities." Many matches at non-league level were going ahead as scheduled in Britain this weekend and Rooney believes Prime Minister Boris Johnson "dodged" the issue by letting football make its own decision about playing on.

The 34-year-old claimed money was key to the authorities' reluctance to cancel games. "The rest of sport - tennis, Formula One, rugby, golf, football in other countries - was closing down and we were being told to carry on," Rooney said.

"I think a lot of footballers were wondering, 'Is it something to do with money being involved in this?'" Once the virus is under control, Rooney wants a radical schedule shake-up which could see the current season being concluded as late as September, and the next two kicking off in winter-time as a result.

"We're happy to play until September if the season extends to then, if that's how it has to be. That's our job. As long as we know we're safe to play and it's a safe environment for spectators, we'll play," Rooney said. "The next World Cup is in November and December 2022, so you could actually use this situation as an opportunity and say we're going to finish the 2019-20 season later this year, then prepare for 2022 by having the next two seasons starting in winter." — AFP