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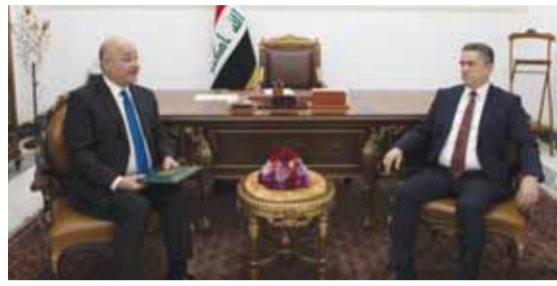
5 Zain changes name of its network to **STAY HOME**



10 Philippines first country to suspend financial markets



16 Iraq names PM as rockets hit base hosting foreign troops



20 Brady announces departure from New England Patriots



PM says Kuwait ready for any crisis, urges solidarity

Kuwait donates \$40m to WHO • Central Bank announces relief measures

Op-Ed

COVID-19: We will come through this together



By Antonio Guterres
Secretary-General of the United Nations

The upheaval caused by the coronavirus - COVID-19 - is all around us. And I know many are anxious, worried and confused. That's absolutely natural. We are facing a health threat unlike any other in our lifetimes. Meanwhile, the virus is spreading, the danger is growing, and our health systems, economies and day-to-day lives are being severely tested.

The most vulnerable are the most affected - particularly our elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions, those without access to reliable health care, and those in poverty or living on the edge. The social and economic fallout from the combination of the pandemic and slowing economies will affect most of us for some months. But the spread of the virus will peak. Our economies will recover.

Until then, we must act together to slow the spread of the virus and look after each other. This is a time for prudence, not panic. Science, not stigma. Facts, not fear. Even though the situation has been classified as a pandemic, it is one we can control. We can slow down transmissions, prevent infections and save lives. But that will take unprecedented personal, national and international action.

COVID-19 is our common enemy. We must declare war on this virus. That means countries have a responsibility to gear up, step up and scale up. How? By implementing effective containment strategies; by activating and enhancing emergency response systems; by dramatically increasing testing capacity and care for patients; by readying hospitals, ensuring they have the space, supplies and

Continued on Page 16

Immune response mapped; masks, gloves ineffective

PARIS: Researchers in Australia said yesterday they had mapped the body's immune response to the novel coronavirus, in a potential breakthrough in the fight against the global killer. A team of scientists were able to test blood samples from a patient who had contracted COVID-19 and was hospitalized with moderate symptoms. Authors of the study, published in the journal Nature Medicine, said it was the first time experts had mapped the body's general immune response to the new disease.

"We saw a really robust immune response that preceded clinical recovery," Katherine Kedzierska, from the University of Melbourne's Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity, told AFP. "We noted an immune response but she was visually still unwell, and three days later the patient recovered." Researchers are in a race against time to try to find a vaccine for the novel coronavirus, which as of 0900 GMT yesterday has registered more than 180,000 confirmed infections and over 7,000 deaths.

Continued on Page 16

- Seven new cases of coronavirus in Kuwait
- MPs call for deporting illegal expats

- People warned to comply or face curfew
- Returnees from 12 countries face quarantine



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and senior commanders at the defense ministry yesterday. — KUNA

By B Izzak and Agencies

KUWAIT: Kuwait will manage the coronavirus crisis as long as it takes, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah said yesterday during a meeting with senior commanders at the defense ministry headed by Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. "The defense ministry has been an integral part of the state's emergency plan since day one," the premier pointed out, stressing that the current crisis requires "solidarity and understanding from all regarding countermeasures being taken".

Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled appreciated the contri-

butions and cooperation of the private sector in the ongoing efforts to contain the spread of the virus and highly commended the thousands of young Kuwaitis who flocked to centers to volunteer and help the state.

Kuwait has donated \$40 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) in contribution to the fight against the spread of COVID-19. The donation came upon directions from HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to help efforts of the international organization in its battle to contain the pandemic, said Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah in a press release.

The Central Bank of Kuwait announced measures

have been implemented to contain the impact of COVID-19. These include a KD 10 million fund initiated by CBK with Kuwaiti banks to support COVID-19 containment efforts, delaying collection of due payments from affected customers without any penalty for three months; refraining from selling assets pledged as collateral, a 1.25% reduction in interest rates in March to lower borrowing costs, stopping charges on points of sale, ATM and online transactions for three months and providing uninterrupted access to financial services through online banking, ATMs, POS, call centers and selected branches.

Continued on Page 16

Saudi shuts mosques; curfew in Jordan; 135 deaths in Iran

RIYADH/TEHRAN/AMMAN: Saudi Arabia will no longer allow Muslims to conduct their five daily prayers and the weekly Friday prayer inside mosques as part of efforts to limit the spread of coronavirus, state news agency SPA said yesterday. The prayers will continue only at the two holy mosques in Makkah and Madinah, the holiest places in Islam, SPA said, citing a decision from the Council of Senior Scholars, the kingdom's highest religious body.

Iran announced yesterday another 135 deaths from the novel coronavirus, bringing the overall toll to 988 in one of the world's worst-hit countries. "Reports

by more than 56 laboratories indicated that we have had 1,178 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection in the past 24 hours," health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said in a televised news conference. "This brings the total number of confirmed cases to 16,169 as of today noon," he added.

Jahanpour also said 5,389 people who were infected had been discharged from hospitals "with general good health". Tehran province recorded the highest number of new infections with 273 fresh cases. Alborz, to the west of Tehran, was next with 116, followed by

Continued on Page 16

Psychology behind toilet paper panic

WASHINGTON: It's a scene that's become familiar around the world: From the US to France to Australia, rows of empty supermarket shelves where toilet paper used to be, the result of coronavirus-induced panic buying. What exactly is it about the rolls of tissue that has caused mayhem across cultures, including at times violent clashes that have reverberated on social media?

At its most basic, say experts, the answer lies in game theory: If everyone buys only what they need, there will be no shortages. If some people start panic buying, the optimal strategy will be for you to follow suit, to make certain you have enough squares to spare. But this doesn't explain it entirely - toilet paper can't save you from infection, and we haven't yet seen the same level of hoarding for more key items like canned foods - so something else is clearly afoot.

"I think it probably stuck out in the dramatic images in social media because it was quite clear, the packets are quite distinctive and it's become

Continued on Page 16



PETRA, Jordan: A worker sprays disinfectant in this archaeological city south of the capital Amman yesterday to prevent the spread of COVID-19. — AFP



BANGKOK: People wearing facemasks push a shopping cart full of toilet paper and kitchen rolls at a supermarket on Monday. — AFP

Gearing up for any emergency, solidarity needed: Kuwait's PM

Defense Ministry contributes to anti-COVID-19 fight



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah attends a meeting with with senior commanders at the Ministry of Defense yesterday. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: Kuwait is managing the crisis as long as it takes, said His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah yesterday. His Highness's remark came during his meeting with senior commanders at the Ministry of Defense; spearheaded by Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled, during the meeting, conveyed greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, as well as salutations of His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for the Forces' "great" technical and logistic support in the ongoing 'battle' against the global spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), mainly the Air Force.

"The Defense Ministry has been an integral part of the state's emergency plan, since day one," His Highness pointed out, stressing that the current crisis requires "solidarity and understanding from all regarding countermeasures being taken." His Highness also appreciated contributions and cooperation of the private sector in the ongoing efforts to contain the spread of the virus. He also highly commended

the thousands of young Kuwaitis who flocked centers to volunteer and help the state, which proved what they are made of.

His Highness the Premier concluded by reiterating the dire need to abide by all precautionary measures the State of Kuwait is implementing in order to sufficiently encounter the pandemic. At the start of the meeting, Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah briefed His Highness the Premier with the ministry's efforts and collaborations with other state bodies in the fight against COVID-19's further spread.

Backing up efforts

Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Sabah had said on Monday that his ministry backs up the efforts of all competent state agencies, notably the Ministry of Health, to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In statements to

Kuwait TV, he said the Cabinet is convening on a daily basis to follow up the developments of the situation as the behest of His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Prime Minister. "Besides, the ministers meet regularly with members of the National Assembly to update them on the latest measures and answer their questions in this regard," he pointed out.

Sheikh Ahmad noted that the government mobilized its resources to address this emergency and made available the strategic reserve of food-stuffs, appreciating the contributions of youth volunteers and the civil society to this effort. He highlighted the critical importance of cooperation by all citizens and residents in Kuwait with the nationwide drive to tackle this exceptional situation. Reminding the public of the urgency of abidance by the preventive measures, Sheikh Ahmad said, "The people in Italy took it lightly and continued going to crowded areas, thus worsening the situation of COVID-19

outbreak." "In China, unlike in Italy, they were able to bring down the prevalence rate of the disease thanks to abidance by the instructions of the concerned authorities," he added. The minister reassured the Kuwaiti people that the situation is under control and the precautions enforced by the government work properly.

Rumors denied

In the meantime, the General Staff of the Kuwaiti Army refuted the speculations, recently circulated by some social media websites, that the army was planning to use military helicopter sprayers in the combat against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). A press release from the directorate of moral guidance and public relations on Monday urged the media outlets, including the social networking websites, to avoid circulating such inaccurate news and rely on the official sources of the Ministry of Defense and other state bodies. The statement reminded that the Ministry of Defense, through the directorate of moral guidance and public relations, is open to any questions from the mass media regarding any issue of public concern. — KUNA



Premier meets top military brass



Senior commanders at the Ministry of Defense attend the meeting.



KUWAIT: Ministers of health, education and foreign affairs meet to discuss ramifications of the coronavirus yesterday. — KUNA

Ministers discuss ramifications of COVID-19

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Humoud Al-Sabah, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Dr Saud Al-Harbi met yesterday to discuss the combat against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The meeting, hosted by

the Ministry of Health, gathered other senior officials from the three ministries. They reviewed the efficacy of the preventive measures adopted so far inside and outside Kuwait to stem the spread of the pandemic, as well as the situation of Kuwaitis abroad and the arrangements for their possible return. — KUNA



Premier visits National Guard

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah yesterday visited the Kuwait National Guard (KNG) headquarters, where he was received by KNG Deputy Chief Sheikh Meshaal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and senior officers. His Highness the Prime Minister presided over a security meeting attended by various KNG commanders to discuss providing all equipment and manpower needed to fight COVID-19.

Hailing the efforts exerted by Kuwait National Guard, His Highness the Prime Minister stressed the need that the government spares no effort to limit any possible damage and noted that all Cabinet decisions in this regard have been issued upon coordination with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and World Health Organization (WHO). "The National Guard an essential player in the contingency plan through backing up and supporting various state bodies," he said, expressing pride on the Guard's achievements.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Meshaal welcomed His Highness the Prime Minister and thanked the Cabinet for its extraordinary efforts on administering the exceptional circumstances Kuwait is going through to limit the spread of the coronavirus. "Thanks to your instructions and the efforts of Cabinet members, Kuwait has become a role model and its measures are highly appreciated by relevant international bodies," Sheikh Meshaal said, stressing that the National Guard will always support MoH measures.

Also speaking during the visit, Kuwait National Guard's assistant deputy for operations and training Maj Gen Faleh Shuja Faleh reviewed the Guard's efforts and plans to help various state bodies such as the civil defense and relevant Ministry of Interior (MoI) sectors in fighting the disease. He also reviewed the protocol of cooperation with MoH and providing quarantine needs and requirements. The National Guard's security and reinforcements commander Brig Hamad Salem Ahmad reviewed the plans set to secure Kout Hotel, Joan Resort and other quarantine sites.



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah attends a meeting during his visit to the Kuwait National Guard (KNG) headquarters yesterday. — National Guard photos



Kuwait National Guard Deputy Chief Sheikh Meshaal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah welcomes His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah speaks during the meeting.

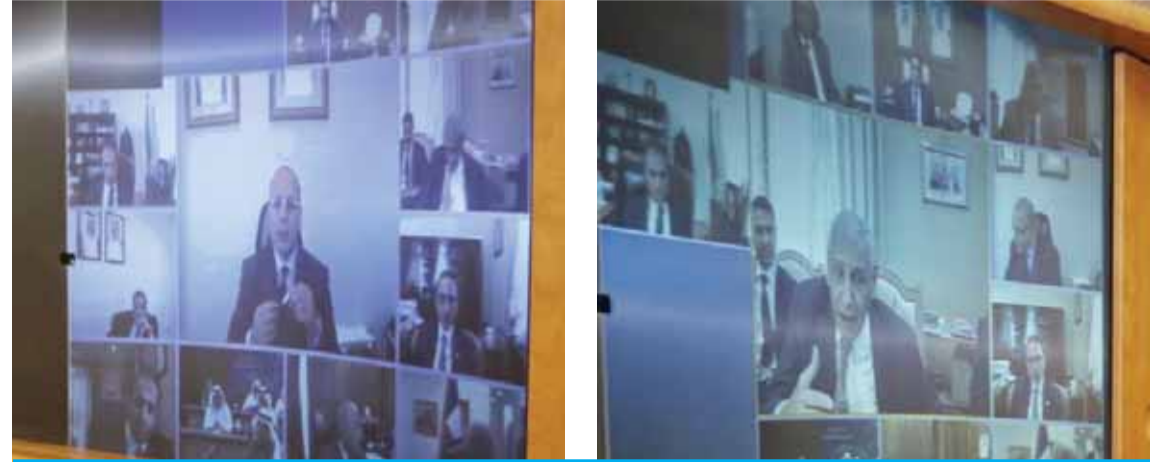
Local

Kuwait donates \$40 million to aid global fight against coronavirus

Amir directs help to Iran, Iraq, Palestine over COVID-19



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah speaks during a video conference call with heads of Kuwait's diplomatic missions in several European countries yesterday. — KUNA photos



Heads of Kuwait's diplomatic missions in European countries participate in the video conference.

KUWAIT: The State of Kuwait have donated \$40 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) in contribution to the fight against the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), currently sweeping the world, a senior Kuwaiti diplomat said yesterday. The donation came upon directions from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to help efforts of the international organization in its battle to contain the pandemic, said Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah in a press release. On March 11, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic.

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah yesterday contacted his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif on the latest regional situation and coronavirus outbreak fallout. During the phone conversation, the Kuwaiti minister conveyed instructions from His High-

ness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for offering aid to Iran in its fight against the virus through the World Health Organization and its specialized agencies. The Iranian foreign minister voiced his country's thanks and appreciation for this humanitarian initiative extended by the State of Kuwait.

Iraq and Palestine

In the meantime, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah called his Iraqi counterpart Mohammad Ali Al-Hakim to mull the current regional happenings and coronavirus ramifications. The Kuwaiti minister, during the contact, quoted His Highness the Amir as having directed providing aid to Iraq in its efforts to contain coronavirus through the World Health Organization and its specialized agencies. The Iraqi foreign minister expressed his country's thanks and appreciation for Kuwait's humanitarian initiative.

Furthermore, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah contacted his Palestinian counterpart Riyad Al-Maliki to discuss the current regional developments and the impact of the coronavirus on the region. During the phone conversation, the Kuwaiti minister informed Maliki about instructions from His Highness the Amir to extend help to Palestine in its fight against the coronavirus through the World Health Organization and its specialized agencies. The Palestinian foreign minister voiced his country's thanks and appreciation for Kuwait's humanitarian initiative. Separately, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah on Monday received a phone call from his Moroccan counterpart Nasser Bourita. During the call, both ministers discussed bilateral relations between both sisterly countries and

the latest regional and international developments.

Video conference

In other news, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah yesterday held a video conference call with heads of Kuwait's diplomatic missions in several European countries. The conference, attended by Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Jarallah, the assistants to the minister and members of the national taskforce, discussed the situation of Kuwaiti nationals in Europe against the backdrop of the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser reminded the Kuwaiti diplomats of the instructions to do their utmost to ensure the safety of all nationals from the risks of the pandemic. He is scheduled to make similar contacts with Kuwaiti envoys to other countries, which have Kuwaiti residents. —KUNA

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 130 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 hundreds have been discharged after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 12 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 March 1 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 vital services will remain open. 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 potential spread of the virus. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has taken measures to make sure that facial masks, hand sanitizers and other goods remain accessible to the public. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended classes for March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs); first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29. 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 suspended flights from Kuwait, whereas Saudi Arabia stopped issuing umrah visas for all nationalities as 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, Iraq, Germany, France, Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom 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 following hotlines to receive inquiries about the coronavirus 24/7: 24970967 - 96049698 - 99048619.

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

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

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Asian men, wearing protective masks, walk past a billboard for Kuwait Airways in Kuwait City on March 14, 2020. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Evacuating Kuwaitis from abroad pending Cabinet instructions: Minister

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Minister of State for Services Affairs and Minister of State for Assembly Affairs Mubarak Al-Harees yesterday presided over the meeting of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation's (DGCA) special supreme committee for limiting the spread of the coronavirus. Speaking to the press after the meeting, Harees said the meeting discussed the measures followed at Kuwait International Airport, as the main gateway into the country and the first line of defense and prevention to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Harees added that since the

breakout of the virus in China and in coordination with the health and interior ministries, the committee has been meeting daily to discuss the latest developments and the preventive measures followed at the airport, including equipment and clinics to examine passengers. Harees said flight suspensions are still in effect at the airport, except for cargo flights and flights carrying citizens back home.

"Evacuating citizens from abroad will start soon upon instructions from the Cabinet," he underlined, pointing out that coordination is in progress with the foreign ministry to allow the evacuation of residents wishing to re-



Minister Mubarak Al-Harees

turn to their home countries, which already started with a MEA flight carrying Lebanese residents back to Lebanon.

Kuwait embassy affirms safety of all citizens in US

WASHINGTON: Kuwait's Embassy in Washington affirmed Monday that there is no coronavirus infection among Kuwaiti citizens in the United States of America. In a statement to the press, the embassy called on Kuwaitis in the US not to leave

their houses except for necessary purposes, urging them to follow the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention website www.cdc.gov to be aware of the instructions of local authorities. The embassy also called on nationals in the US to contact it or the consulates general in Los Angeles and New York City, on the following numbers: Kuwait Embassy in Washington: 2022620758. The Consulate General in New York: 9172426688. The Consulate General in Los Angeles: 3102793644. The Cultural Office in Washington: 2023642104. Washington Health Office: 2023202415. Washington Military Office: 2023903416. Los Angeles Cultural Office: 424666 4214. — KUNA

Kuwait oil price down to \$32.16 pb



KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil shed \$3.30, settling at \$32.16 pb Monday against \$35.46 pb on Friday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. In global markets, prices took another nosedive as the already growing fear of the coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to amplify. Brent crude went down by \$3.36, settling at \$30.50 pb, while the West Texas Intermediate lost \$2.08 to land at \$29.65 pb. The OPEC daily basket price went down \$3.51 a barrel Monday to settle at \$30.63 pb, compared with \$34.14

pb last Friday, the organization said yesterday. The annual average of the OPEC basket price hit \$52.43 pb last year, it said in its daily bulletin. The OPEC Reference Basket of Crudes (ORB) is made up of Saharan Blend (Algeria), Girassol (Angola), Djeno (Congo), Oriente (Ecuador), Zafiro (Equatorial Guinea), Rabi Light (Gabon), Iran Heavy (Islamic Republic of Iran), Basra Light (Iraq), Kuwait Export (Kuwait), Es Sider (Libya), Bonny Light (Nigeria), Arab Light (Saudi Arabia), Murban (UAE) and Mery (Venezuela). — KUNA

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Local

Lab technicians, first responders face high risk in COVID-19 fight

Medical workers follow ministry protocols, practice proper hygiene

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Medical technologist Richard, a frontliner in the testing of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), is scared for his health and that of his family. But he is not complaining since it's his job to be in service when called upon to perform his duty. He is married with two children. "I always pray and seek God's protection. This is my bread and butter for the last 28 years and I can't complain about it. But at the back of my head, I am scared and worried for my family. What if, God forbid, I contract the virus - I can probably transmit it to my family, whom I dearly love. I don't want them to have such a deadly disease," he said.

Laboratory testing is done along with the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test. Normally, the coronavirus will be detected in the PCR, but doctors will also use some alternative means to re-confirm the presence of the virus by testing blood samples. Richard showed Kuwait Times documents of several people who tested positive for COVID-19 or HIV. "This and more is part of my job as a microbiologist. I test blood, even urine and stool samples," he ex-

“I am scared and worried for my family”

plained. "So I am handling the blood of patients with suspected coronavirus or other viruses, and some of them indeed have coronavirus in their blood samples."

According to Richard, knowing the job well coupled with strictly following standard operating procedure by the laboratory, plus some extra precautions and prayers can save him from any disease. In order to protect his family, he religiously follows the measures advised by his laboratory. "We wear disposable lab shoes and suits when conducting tests. We cannot leave the lab area wearing them - we are sprayed with sanitizers. We have an area in which to remove and wear safety gear," he said.

"I normally wear regular clothes underneath, which I change when arriving home. I do not take



KUWAIT: A Kuwait health ministry worker scans an expatriate living in Kuwait at a specified place to be tested for coronavirus in Mishref. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

my shoes inside the house. I directly go to the bathroom, wash my body with soap and warm water, followed by hand hygiene. That is my routine now - I am taking extra precautions in the face of the coronavirus. My dirty clothes are washed with hot water," Richard added. Being on the frontline, an ambulance nurse named Ruel also shared his experience in handling patients with coronavirus. "We handle all calls from the quarantine site to the hospital. We cannot complain because this is part of our job. So we are ready at all times, handling whatever cases are given to us," he said. "From the quarantine site we transfer confirmed cases to hospital. I personally accompany the patients. Of course I am scared, but this is part of our job as registered

nurses. We follow the protocols given by the ministry of health, and practice proper hygiene in all situations to lessen our chances of being contaminated with the virus," he said.

"Yesterday, I was dispatched to respond to an emergency call in Mahboula. I was told it was a patient with some medical issues, but when I reached the scene, police were there and informed me that the patient is suspected to be infected with the coronavirus. They told me to see the patient, but I declined because I wasn't wearing proper protective gear. So I called another ambulance to respond. We have a particular ambulance intended for coronavirus patients," Ruel said. All identities have been changed to protect the respondents.

Zain changes network name to STAY HOME

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced changing its network's name to STAY HOME. The initiative comes in line with the directives of the Council of Ministers and the State's tremendous efforts in these exceptional circumstances to fight the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), reminding its valued customers to commit to staying at home as much as possible and contribute to ending this pandemic together.

This collaboration comes as part of Zain's commitment to reflect the Kuwaiti private sector's role in shouldering the public sector for the nation's wellbeing. The company also recently launched a social media campaign entitled 'This is Your Time' to send positive messages to the public about the importance of being a responsible citizen in this time of crisis, not listen to rumors nor spread them, take part in volunteer efforts, commit to staying at home, as well as abiding by the authorities' directives.

Zain recently collaborated with the Ministry of Health (MOH) to offer its customers free calls to any of MOH's three hotlines: 24970967, 96049698, and 99048619 in order to enable them to inquire about any health or medical information related to coronavirus disease (COVID-19) directly from the ministry's specialized team and ensure taking the correct information from the official and certified sources.

Zain also provided MOH with free bulk SMS messages to send medical and awareness content to the community during this period. In addition, the company sent a number of awareness messages in collaboration with the ministry's team through its official social media channels. Zain also broadcasted official MOH awareness videos on coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in seven languages: Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Farsi, Filipino, Bengali, and Santhali. The company was also keen on hosting Family Medicine Specialist Dr Ahmad Abdulmalek in a live broadcast through its Instagram channel to receive questions from followers and present medical and precautionary advice related to the spread of the coron-

Municipality explains exemptions from store closures

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality yesterday issued a statement explaining the facilities to be closed on Cabinet orders made as part of precautionary measures taken to fight the spread of the coronavirus. The statement said the closure includes all shopping malls, barbershops and beauty salons, spas, gyms and swimming pools, recreation and children's arcades and the Friday and Mubarakiya markets.

The closure decision exempts administrative offices in malls' upper floors, stores overlooking streets and yards provided doors opening inside the malls are closed, foodstuff outlets inside malls provided they



avirus. Zain affirmed its utmost commitment in all the instructions and precautionary measures outlined by the Ministry of Health to contribute to fighting the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Zain supplied all its kiosks and self-service machines in all of Kuwait's areas with sanitizers, and the company's team continuously and periodically sanitizes all machines to ensure the safety of customers. Zain also notified all sales staff to wear medical gloves, stop the use of biometric devices, and more.

Zain also launched an internal awareness campaign for the safety of its employees, through which the company distributed precautionary items and sanitizers to all staff and sent periodic awareness content. The company also hosted Inaya Medical Center Manager Dr Samer Ashour in a LIVE broadcast on Instagram to receive questions from staff and present medical and precautionary advice related to coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Zain spares no efforts to achieve its comprehensive Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility Strategy that closely focuses on supporting the public sector and shouldering public health initiatives. The company strongly believes that launching and supporting such initiatives helps infuse a sense of responsibility into members of the society, and help support those who are in need of help.

Zain is proud of its long list of programs and contributions that serve noble causes through strategically partnering with all entities, including non-profit organizations, governmental institutions, and global entities.

have special entrances and co-ops. Restaurants cannot serve dine-in customers and only provide takeaway services while fully observing Cabinet regulations concerning the number of customers received, queues and health conditions. Shisha is strictly banned.

Meanwhile, Jahra municipality inspectors conducted a wide-scale inspection campaign in various areas, said Jahra municipality follow-up manager Mohsen Al-Thuwaikh noting that the campaign inspected 13 barber-shops, nine cafes and 26 stores that resulted in filing three citations and closing three stores for operating prior to getting municipal approval.

In other news, Kuwait Municipality official spokesperson Mohammed Al-Mutairi strongly denied recent social media reports about instructions to dig 50 graves with special specifications and following special burial procedures for bodies to be buried in them. Mutairi stressed that the funeral department still works normally and that it follows the most healthy and sharia-compliant procedures on washing, shrouding and burying the dead in a way that fully respects their dignity. Mutairi urged the public to get information from reliable sources and ignore rumors.

In My View

Shutting mosques during an emergency

By Hassan Twaha Bwambale

Due to the fact that some people have insistently requested me to share my thoughts about the cancellation of the five daily prayers in congregations in mosques, I have decided to write this short article, hoping it will be of benefit to those who will read it.

First and foremost, I would like to remind readers that we cannot always keep the status quo. The world will always change until we meet our Lord (the Majestic and Almighty). About this matter, there is an Arabic proverb that can be translated as: "Nothing lasts forever."

Therefore, we should readily accept change and learn how to cope with it. Now we come to the issue of how to respond to the cancellation of the five daily prayers in congregations in mosques:

Firstly, we should understand that the authorities in Kuwait are working endlessly to ensure that the Coronavirus is contained, and all this is to everyone's benefit. Therefore, we ought to help them within our jurisdiction, and one of the ways of supporting them is to follow their ordinances.

Secondly, there are many religious texts and historical events that support the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs' decision to cancel praying in congregations in mosques. The following are among them:

a. It is prohibited for any person suffering from an infectious disease to attend both the Friday prayer and the five daily prayers. Abu Salama, son of Abdur-Rahman bin Awf narrated that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said what can be translated as: "A sick or ill person should not be taken to a healthy one." (Saheeh Muslim # 2, 221)

b. A delegation should not include any person carrying an infectious disease. Ash-Shareef bin Suwaid Ath-Thaqafi (RA) said, "There was a leper in the (Ta'if) delegation that went to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to pledge allegiance. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) sent a message to him that: "We have accepted your allegiance, so go back." (Saheeh Muslim # 2, 231)

c. According to the custom those days, people used to pledge allegiance to each other by shaking hands. The Prophet (PBUH) was concerned that the leper would infect his fellow tribesmen of Taif, and if proceeded to Madinah, he would also infect those who got in contact with him. So, he asked him to return.

c. In such a situation like the one we are facing today, the following golden rule has to be understood and implemented. Abdullah bin Abbas (May Allah be pleased with both of them) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said what can be translated as: "Do not harm people un-intentionally nor reciprocate harm intentionally." (Al-Albani said that the Hadeeth above is strong being corroborated by other narrations, see At-Taaliqaat Ar-Tadhiyyah 2/4767)

d. Among the things that Islam came to protect is life. So anything that poses danger to our health, wealth, well-being and life is strictly prohibited. We ought to understand and acknowledge that our bodies belong to Allah (the Almighty and Majestic), so we should follow His injunctions on how to take care of ourselves and others.

d. If you do not attend the Friday prayer and the five daily compulsory prayers in a congregation due to a strong and justifiable reason, then you get a full reward as though you prayed in a congregation. Abu Mousa Al-Ash'arey (RA) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said what can be translated as: "When Allah's servant falls sick or ill, deeds similar to what he used to do at home and while healthy are written for him." (Al-Bukhari # 2, 996)

What should we do during this time?

a. Pray in a congregation at home with your family members. Try your best to impart to them some knowledge about Allah (SWT), Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), his bona-fide companions, and our rightly-guided ancestors.

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

c. Read and learn as much as you can, i.e. sharpen the edge. Learn more about your religion, improve your skills and share whatever you learn on social media or directly. Also, allocate some time to read/recite the Noble Quran, making sure you ponder its meanings, implement the teachings therein according to your capability, and consequently share the knowledge.

d. Meditate: Meditation improves memory, attention, mood, immune system, sleep and creativity.

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

f. Get involved in any online activity; either teaching or advising or finding solutions to some people's problems. As Muslims, it is our responsibility to present Islam to people of other faiths. Let us use social media to impart knowledge about Islam or at least arouse people's curiosity about it.

g. Cut the major sources of stress such as unnecessary spending, clutter, and family misunderstandings. Forgive yourself for the past mistakes, forgive those who might have wronged you, and repent to Allah (SWT).

h. Let's supplicate to Allah (SWT) as much as we can to return the situation to normal and to save us from this infectious pandemic.

Courtesy of the TIES Center: the TIES Center aims at empowering Kuwait's expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society, and to facilitate opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity.

News in brief

Online platform for 'home quarantine'

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health yesterday launched an online platform to register people who are in home quarantine. Director of Capital Health Zone Dr Afrah Al-Sarraf announced the launch of an online service to register the data of people who are in home quarantine to follow up with them without the need to visit the health centers. This online service was launched for citizens and expatriates to reduce the spread of infection and in line with the ministry's plan. Dr Sarraf said that the service was applied, and people must register through the website: <http://hcare.com/pa/>.

5,000 volunteers registered

KUWAIT: Director of the Training and Volunteer Affairs Department at Ministry of Interior Col Ayad Al-Mutairi said that 5,000 volunteers have registered with the Civil Defense so far. Only Kuwaitis aged 18 years or above are eligible to volunteer.

Passed out person

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Interior denied social media rumors that the person who passed out in Al-Andalus Co-Op Society had coronavirus. Officers were dispatched to the scene and the man was found to have passed out. He had diabetes.

Egyptians in Kuwait

KUWAIT: The Egyptian embassy in Kuwait urged Egyptian nationals who are on visit visa, tourism visa, or have canceled their residency visa and want to go back to Egypt to contact the embassy via WhatsApp (67614221) or through their official Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/egconskwt/>) or by calling the Egyptian consulate: 25234490 - 25234491 - 25234492.

Bedoon teachers' salaries

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Education announced they will send the overdue salaries for the security workers, correspondents, and bedoon teachers by today. Meanwhile, Kuwait University said it will support all precautionary measures implemented by the Ministry of Health, affirming that it is ready to offer any help when needed.

International

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18, 2020



Military roadblocks and curfews: Latin America tightens virus controls

Ticking time bombs! US jails raise alarm amid virus outbreak

Page 8

Page 8



JERUSALEM: A man walks past the Dome of the Rock, at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, in the Old City of Jerusalem. Israel imposed a two-week quarantine on all travelers entering the country, almost stopping tourism and limiting public gatherings in response to the COVID-19 coronavirus disease. — AFP

Lockdown shutter Holy Land tourism

Under coronavirus lockdown, Armageddon is like the end of the world

ARMAGEDDON: Not a soul could be seen on Armageddon, where a near-complete coronavirus lockdown is keeping Christian pilgrims away from the Biblical site in northern Israel, half an hour's drive from Nazareth. In normal times, tourists would be arriving daily to work their way up to the ruins on Armageddon's hazy summit, by tradition the End of Days battleground between good and evil in the final book of the New Testament.

There is no sign of tourist or pilgrim coaches now at the ancient mound. "A few brave people have come up here for a walk. I wouldn't recommend it," said a security guard, warning of infection. He was one of just a handful of workers at the site. Near the modern Israeli town and prison of Megiddo, the earliest written reference to Armageddon seems to have been during the reign of the Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III, who defeated Syrian and Canaanite states there in 1468 BC.

It is one of many tourist sites which now lie deserted after Israel imposed a mandatory 14-day quarantine for all people entering the country, effectively

shutting down the tourism industry. Looking east across the Galilee, Nazareth's imposing Basilica of the Annunciation - built on a site that many Christians believe was the childhood home of Jesus' mother, Mary - is also bereft of all but the most hardy faithful. Priests filling plastic bags with white candles and holy water on Sunday were asking worshippers to pray from home. The church itself was locked between services, and attendance was capped at 10 congregants. "We were preparing for what should have been the heaviest Easter tourism season on record," said Sister Beatrice Bourrat, who works with Catholic pilgrims visiting Nazareth and other holy cities across Israel and the occupied West Bank. "Guest houses and hotels had hired seasonal workers,

Now everybody is sitting at home. It's sad," she said.

Essential services

Israel has reported more than 300 confirmed cases of coronavirus. The Palestinian Authority has reported over 40 in the West Bank, and religious authorities have closed down the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Jesus's birthplace, which is also empty of visitors. The steel doors of Nazareth's Old City market were mostly shut over the weekend on advice from Israel's health ministry, apart from one shop: a coffee roastery which specializes in grinding beans for an ultra-strong Arabic-style brew.

"The government said essential services should

remain open. Coffee is an essential service," said Raghad Fahoum, who manages Fahoum Coffee and Spices. But with no tourists to serve, he's bracing for hardship. "Something tells me we haven't hit the bottom yet," he said.

Even a brief drop in tourism ripples through the economy in tourism-dependent cities like Nazareth and Bethlehem, said Basseem Asfour, president of the Nazareth City Council. "Usually, the church is overflowing with people on Sundays, locals and pilgrims. This is the fewest people I've ever seen here," said Asfour, outside the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation. That church has also capped worshippers at 10.

The sandstone Orthodox shrine's underground spring, according to tradition, is where Mary was drawing water during the Annunciation - when the angel Gabriel told her she would give birth to Jesus. One worshipper at the church, Rawan Jarjoura, said she was coming to pray "because we need God in times like this". "I'll keep my distance from my neighbor, and try to stay close to God," she said. — Reuters



Popular sites Armageddon, Nazareth fall quiet

Israel imposes cyber-monitoring of coronavirus cases

JERUSALEM: Israel invoked emergency regulations yesterday to deploy cyber monitoring in the battle against the coronavirus, saying halting its spread outweighed concerns about the invasion of privacy. The move will provide the government with cellular data to retrace the movements of people infected by the virus and locate and alert those who had been in their vicinity.

Such cyber monitoring would normally require parliamentary ratification and judicial oversight. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who announced the measure on Monday, circumvented the process by winning cabinet approval yesterday to put the order into effect under emergency regulations. The use of anti-terrorism technology to track infected people and anyone with whom they have come in contact drew criticism from civil rights groups when Netanyahu first proposed it over the weekend.

Israeli authorities said cyber data collected by the Shin Bet internal security service would be limited to halting the spread of the disease and deleted when the emergency is over. But The Association for Civil Right in Israel called the move "a dangerous precedent and a slippery slope". Justice Minister Amir Ohana dismissed the criticism. "The concerns of those disturbed by cyber monitoring are outweighed by the threat we are facing," he said on Israel Radio.

Gabi Ashkenazi, a senior member of the centrist Blue and White party, whose leader, Benny Gantz, was tapped by Israel's president on Monday to try to form a new government following a March 2 election, also criticized the use of emergency orders. "It's inappropriate to approve such a measure in this manner, without public and parliamentary supervision,"



ASHDOD: This picture taken during a press presentation of the hospitalization service for future patients with coronavirus at Samson Assuta Ashdod University Hospital shows a male nurse at the epidemics service using a computer. — AFP

he wrote on Twitter. Further measures announced by Netanyahu on Monday included putting most of the public sector workforce on a one-month leave and reducing private sector employees to 30 percent attendance at their workplaces.

There are more than 300 confirmed coronavirus cases in Israel. In the Palestinian territories, 41 coronavirus cases have been confirmed in the occupied West Bank, with none in the Gaza Strip. Israel has taken stringent steps to slow its spread, closing schools, malls, restaurants and most places of leisure, as well as limiting gatherings to 10 people. The Palestinian Health Ministry said on Monday that anyone coming into the West Bank from Jordan must go into self-isolation for 14 days. — Reuters

Confusion, concern, frustration as virus hits the Philippines

MANILA: Millions of people woke up confused, confined and frustrated in the Philippines yesterday, as a sweeping home quarantine order kicked in with just a few hours of warning, and Southeast Asia prepared tighter measures against a surge in coronavirus cases. With many unaware that half the population of 107 million had been told to stay home for a month, stranded workers crowded checkpoints on the edges of Manila as vehicles tried to duck suspensions and police impounded taxis that were still running.

"I need to make a living for my family," said Albert Santos, 42, the driver of a passenger jeep, adding that he would try to make as much money before being forced to stop. "I can't stop or they have nothing to eat." The Philippines is the first regional nation to take such drastic steps against the virus, which President Rodrigo Duterte described as "the fight of our lives", after deeming existing curbs on movement and gatherings insufficient. In just 10 days, virus infections in the Philippines climbed to 142 from three, with 12 deaths. Malaysia will follow suit from today, closing borders, schools and most businesses, while restricting internal movement, after a daily jump of 125 cases to 553, nearly two-thirds of them linked to a major event at a mosque.

Cambodia's infections doubled to 24 yesterday and Thailand reported 30 new ones, taking its tally to 177, for a nearly threefold jump in a week. The regional trend casts more doubt on the view that warmer weather might stem the spread. Thailand's cabinet agreed yesterday to close schools, cinemas, bars and entertainment centers, and postpone next month's festivities for New Year in the mainly Buddhist nation.

Manila's usually busy business areas were almost deserted on the first morning of home quarantine, with only delivery trucks, police patrols and occasional private vehicles on the roads. City workers in protective suits dis-



MANILA: Residents get into a truck for a free ride home in Manila yesterday, as the government imposed measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, including suspending all public transport on the main Luzon island. — AFP

infected public areas, security guards sat outside banks and convenience stores and workers trickled home after night shifts at call centers and medical clinics, among the few exemptions to Duterte's curbs.

Quarantine? What quarantine?

Many shift workers were stranded after transport was suspended. Police pulled over dozens of taxis, with drivers - and many commuters - unaware of the new quarantine measures, announced on Monday afternoon and only clarified late at night. "I need to work. I don't get paid if I don't show up," said Sheila Reyes, 24, as she waited hopefully for a ride to a factory, some of which are allowed to operate.

"If I have to, I'll walk to work." The measures widen a lockdown since Friday that brought immigration limits, curfews, closures of schools and malls, bans on gatherings, social distancing, and restrictions on movement for the capital. The Philippines suspended financial markets yesterday, the first trading shutdown in a world struggling to rein in the virus. Malaysia postponed a meeting this week of APEC finance officials. — Reuters

International

India shuts Taj Mahal and boosts coronavirus testing

Cases in Pakistan rise to 195 after testing errors

MUMBAI: India closed the Taj Mahal, its principal tourist site, and the financial hub of Mumbai ordered offices providing non-essential services to keep half their staff at home in increased measures to curb the coronavirus in South Asia. Mumbai, a metropolis of 18 million people, also authorized hospital and airport authorities to stamp wrists of those ordered to self-isolate with indelible ink reading "Home Quarantined" and displaying the date the quarantine ends.

There have been concerns that over-stretched health systems in India and the rest of the region could struggle to handle a surge in cases. New Delhi has already taken measures including suspending most visas into the country. Indian health authorities are analyzing data from more than 1,000 patients who had not travelled to coronavirus-affected regions or known to have come in contact with confirmed cases, to determine whether the disease has begun spreading through the country, a senior official from the Indian Council of Medical Research said. "That will tell us whether it has already reached in-community, or we are still in the earlier stage where the disease is limited to the traveler and close contacts," the official told Reuters.

Restrictions mount

India's western state of Maharashtra, home to Mumbai, has been the hardest hit with 39 confirmed coronavirus cases, or about a quarter of the 126 cases in the country. A patient there died after contracting

the virus yesterday, Praveen Pardeshi, who heads Mumbai's civic body, told Reuters. It was the third death in India.

Along with the Taj Mahal, dozens of other monuments and museums including the Ajanta and Ellora caves and religious sites such as Mumbai's Siddhivinayak Temple were closed.

The curbs in Mumbai come just days after the city shut down schools, cinemas, malls and gyms, and also banned mass gatherings. India expanded its travel restrictions on Monday, banning passengers from countries of the European Union and European Free Trade Association, Turkey and the United Kingdom - including its own citizens. Neighboring Sri Lanka said it would suspend all international flights for two weeks beginning Wednesday. Indian airline GoAir suspended all international operations and asked some of its employees to take unpaid leave.

Pakistan rise

Pakistan reported the number of confirmed cases had more than doubled for a second consecutive day, reaching 195. Officials said the jump was largely due to errors in testing and quarantine of travelers who recently returned from Iran through a border crossing in Balochistan province.

"If the arrangements were better we could have saved these people from the virus," Saeed Ghani, a minister in the provincial Sindh government where



AGRA: Visitors wearing facemasks as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus have their picture taken outside Taj Mahal following its closure yesterday. — AFP

many of the cases were detected, told a television channel on Monday night. Pakistan postponed its Pakistan Super League cricket tournament. Authorities in South Asia have struggled to get travelers to self-isolate or stay quarantined in medical facilities that many view as poor and unhygienic.

At least 38 Afghans who recently returned from Iran and were in isolation escaped from a facility in western Afghanistan on Monday after breaking windows and attacking hospital staff. At least one of them was confirmed to have the coronavirus. The country currently has 22 confirmed cases. Separately, in Navi Mumbai, a suburb of India's financial hub, local media

reported that 11 people, who had been isolated after returning from Dubai, also fled the hospital, forcing police to launch a manhunt.

With the overnight rise in Pakistan, the overall number of confirmed cases in South Asia is now approaching the 400 mark. Sri Lanka, which is heavily reliant on tourism for foreign exchange, saw its currency hit a record low against the dollar yesterday. Pakistan's stock market slid again a day after recording one of its biggest ever one-day declines. Its central bank cut its policy rate by 75 basis points yesterday ahead of an expected decline in inflation due to the virus. — Reuters



Sri Lanka rupee hits record low, Pakistan cuts rates

Iran 'temporarily' frees prisoners as virus toll mounts

DUBAI: Iran has temporarily freed about 85,000 prisoners, including political prisoners in response to the coronavirus epidemic, a judiciary spokesman said yesterday. The death toll in Iran from the coronavirus has reached 988 and a total of 16,169 people have been confirmed infected across the country, one of the worst national outbreaks outside China, where the new virus originated.

"So far, some 85,000 prisoners have been released... Also in the jails we have taken precautionary measures to confront the outbreak," judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili said. He did not elaborate on when those released would have to return to jail. A day after Iran released 70,000 prisoners in early March, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Javād Rehmān, said he had asked Tehran to free all political prisoners temporarily from its overcrowded and disease-ridden jails to help stem the spread of coronavirus.

Rehman said only those serving sentences of less than five years had been freed, while prisoners charged with heavier sentences and those linked to their participation in anti-government protests remained in jail. Iran has released at least a dozen political prisoners in the past days, according to activists and rights groups. But prominent political prisoners still remain in jail. The United States has called for the release of dozens of dual nationals and foreigners held mainly on spying charges in Iran, saying that Washington will hold the government directly responsible for any American deaths.

'Committing suicide'

Iran's clerical rulers have rejected locking down cities despite the rising death toll and the rate of new cases but they have urged people to avoid travelling



QOM: A child rides his bicycle near the Fatima Masumeh shrine in the holy city of Qom, about 130 kilometers south of the capital Tehran. Iran closed four key Shiite pilgrimage sites across the Islamic republic on Monday in line with measures to stop the spread of the new coronavirus. — AFP

ahead of Iranian new year on March 20 amid concerns over further spread of the virus. Many Iranians have ignored calls by the health authorities to stay at home, and shops and restaurants remained open in the country. "Stay at home... Shopping for the new year is like committing suicide these days," a health ministry official told state television.

Mass Friday prayers have been cancelled across the country, it added. In a rare move, the establishment has closed the holy Shiite Muslim sites and shrines in Mashhad and Qom, the epicenter of Iran's coronavirus outbreak. Police dispersed a group of hardline demonstrators who gathered on late Monday at Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad and Masumeh Shrine in Qom to protest against their closure, state media reported. Two protesters had been arrested.

Officials have blamed US sanctions, reimposed on Tehran since Washington quit Iran's 2015 nuclear agreement with six powers, for hampering Tehran's fight against the coronavirus. Tehran has called on other countries to back its call for lifting of US sanctions. Sources told Reuters on Monday that Wash-

ington was unlikely to ease sanctions on Iran despite an appeal from China that it do so because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Last week, Iran said it had asked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for \$5 billion in emergency funding to combat the outbreak. The United Arab Emirates, a rival of Iran, has put aside differences to lend support by sending two planes carrying 32 tons of medical supplies, including gloves and surgical masks. Other countries in the Middle East have imposed strict measures such as closing their borders and suspending flights.

Kuwait's health ministry yesterday reported seven new cases, all among Kuwaitis who had been to Britain to take the country's toll to 130. Bahrain on Monday reported the Arab Gulf region's first death from the disease as the number of infections in the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council crossed 1,000. Oman, which lies across the Gulf from Iran, said anyone entering the sultanate as of yesterday would be quarantined. It had earlier imposed restrictions on entry to allow only Gulf Arab citizens. — Reuters

Under watch: City workers protest digital surveillance

CHENNAI: Every evening at the end of his shift, Anil Sharma heads to a rally ground in the Indian city of Chandigarh to join hundreds of colleagues protesting a new initiative that lets the local administration keep track of city workers using GPS watches. A municipal gardener in the capital of the northern Punjab state, Sharma has been protesting against the watches that city employees are being told to wear to track their efficiency, a move he called "humiliating" and "unethical".

"I have worked for 25 years to keep this city beautiful and now they want to make me a bonded laborer and humiliate me," Sharma said. "Besides, we have supervisors who monitor our work and this tracking cannot be forced on us. It is unethical," he said in a phone interview.

As India pushes ahead with its plan to turn 100 urban centers into smart cities, local governments are using technology like GPS watches to provide data they can use to improve efficiency and tighten budgets. But city employees, campaigners and technology experts have raised concerns about privacy and the potential misuse of that data, as well as the susceptibility

of the watches to failure like weak GPS signal or the devices switching off.

For three months Sharma and his colleagues from various departments like horticulture, sanitation and health have been gathering to demand that officials in Chandigarh, hailed as one of India's cleanest cities, stop using the GPS watches. They are among a growing number of municipal workers in a dozen cities across India who are protesting the linking of surveillance data to performance and salaries.

Under the project, which launched in Chandigarh in February, workers are mandated to wear the GPS watches during their working hours. The watches feed a stream of data to a central control room, where officials monitor the movements of each employee. If workers remove their watches, they are penalized, although there is no comprehensive data available on how many workers have been fined so far, or by how much.

"The efficiency trackers seem like an over-reach," said Nandini Chami, deputy director at IT for Change, a Bangalore-based non-profit. "Given the nature of the employer-employee relationship, it is essential to know what



CHENNAI: Security personnel stand at the entrance of a shopping mall closed amid concerns over the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, in Chennai yesterday. — AFP

are the boundaries of this surveillance and what will be a worker's right to appeal any data they want to contest," she said. Municipal commissioner K K Yadav, Chandigarh's top civic official, said in a phone interview that the program is about improving efficiency.

"This is an efficient way to check if our workers are on the ground doing their jobs," added Yadav, who said he also wears a watch, to set an example. "Their salaries will be linked to this tracker and all the data will be put in the public domain eventually for increasing accountability." Yadav noted that there is no expectation of privacy

for government employees while they are at work and that complaints and appeals would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Suresh Kumar Sharma has been driving a sewer-cleaning machine for over two decades, unclogging street drains throughout Chandigarh. He said he has raised questions with his supervisors and other senior officials as he tries to understand the need for GPS surveillance. "Sometimes we receive five complaints (of blocked drains) in a day, but are able to attend to only one because cleaning blocked drains takes time," he said. — Reuters

News in brief

Robbery suspect extradited

SINGAPORE: A suspect in a rare Singapore bank robbery is set to face charges in the Asian city-state after four years avoiding extradition to the country as he attempted to reach his native Canada, authorities said yesterday. Singapore police and the country's public prosecutor said in a joint statement that David James Roach had been sent back by Britain after being detained there in 2018 en route to Canada. His arrest followed an earlier spell in a Thailand jail on charges related to carrying stolen cash after Roach initially fled Singapore for Bangkok in 2016, the statement said. Thai authorities refused to send him to Singapore as the countries do not have an extradition treaty. He is scheduled to be charged in court later with robbery and money laundering related to allegations that he stole Sg\$30,000 (\$22,000) from a Standard Chartered bank branch after strolling in and presenting a threatening note. — AFP

COVID-19 cases at WHO

GENEVA: Two cases of COVID-19 have been registered at the World Health Organization headquarters, a spokesman said yesterday. The WHO, based in the Swiss city of Geneva, is coordinating the international response to the new coronavirus pandemic, which has infected more than 180,000 people and killed more than 7,000 across 145 countries. "We do have two staff confirmed with symptoms of COVID-19," spokesman Christian Lindmeier told reporters at a virtual press conference. "This was last week, Friday and Thursday. They both have gone home. They have self-isolated. They showed symptoms." Colleagues in the office have been checked and we're waiting for further information on those. Everything so far seems OK with them. He said all but essential staff were working remotely. — AFP

Las Vegas grinds to halt

LOS ANGELES: Slot machines switched off, blackjack tables deserted... several of the biggest casinos in Las Vegas shut their doors yesterday to tackle the spread of the new coronavirus. The sweeping closures will deal a heavy blow to tourists and gamblers-and many of the city's vulnerable contract workers. The virus claimed its first victim in Nevada on Monday, with a death reported in Clark County, which encompasses the Las Vegas Strip, a street packed with world-famous hotels and casinos. With US authorities now recommending that mass events with 10 or more people be canceled, MGM Resorts said it would temporarily suspend operations until further notice. — AFP

Virus hits Somalia, Tanzania

DAR ES SALAAM: Tanzania and Somalia on Monday became the latest East Africa countries to confirm their first cases of coronavirus, as neighboring countries shuttered borders and schools as fears of contagion rose. As the global pandemic takes root in Africa, Chinese billionaire Jack Ma announced he was donating 20,000 testing kits, 100,000 masks and 1,000 protective suits to each of the continent's 54 countries. "We take precautions and get prepared ahead of time, as Africa can benefit from the experience and lessons of other countries that were earlier hit hard by the virus," he said in a statement on Twitter. In a little over a week, 21 new African countries have reported cases, bringing the total affected to 30. In West Africa, Liberia and Benin also recorded their first cases Monday. — AFP

International

Plea for masks, gloves as anxious French health workers face virus

Fearful workers raise alarm over a lack of protective gear

PARIS: Fearful health workers across France sounded an alarm yesterday over a lack of protective gear as hospitals, with hundreds of coronavirus patients in critical care, braced for an onslaught of new cases. With more than 5,000 people officially recorded as infected in the country and some 400 in serious condition, France is scrambling to slow the spread of COVID-19 by implementing travel restrictions, closing non-essential retail businesses and limiting people's movements.

But there are fears that hospitals could become overwhelmed. "We feel like we are going to the front, a little like we are in infantry," said a nurse from the Edouard-Herriot hospital in Lyon, requesting anonymity, who said there was a lack of screening for even the healthcare workers most likely to be exposed. "We are told that we are heroes but we are firstly professionals and above all we want to be protected."

Mustapha Soussi, doctor in charge of emergencies at the hospital in La Mure in the Hautes-Alpes region, said one practitioner had threatened not to come into work. "Staff are worried about the lack of masks, we fear possible infection because we are in the front line," he said. Concerns over masks, hand sanitizer and gloves were particularly acute among community health providers. "We have zero equipment," said Kaouthar ben Amor, a home nurse in the Mediterranean port city of Marseille and a mother of a little girl.

She and her colleagues provide in-home care to some 30 patients. "I had to beg for masks at the pharmacy," she said, adding that she was able to buy only 10. She shared them with a colleague who could not get any because the pharmacies are out of stock and now has to wear the same mask for her entire working day, from 5:30am to midday, and then 3pm to 8pm. "We are afraid for our patients, for us," she said. "We are crying out for help because we lack resources."

"But of course, we continue to treat our patients because it is crucial for them—we must take care of them!" Luc Lavaud, a general practitioner in Saint-Georges-de-Mons in the central Puy-de-Dôme region said he planned to provide masks and hand sanitiser for anyone arriving at his office with a cough. But he said the plan would only work for so long. "I have 50 masks left. And after that?"

"Who will go in our place?"

Also on Monday, the country's National Order of Nurses called for emergency measures to provide protective equipment like masks, eye protectors and gloves to a wide range of health workers, including doctors, pharmacists, nurses, dentists, physiotherapists and midwives. "Health professionals must not become vectors of contamination," it said in a statement. The nursing group also called for special measures, like shared childcare arrangements, to help boost the nursing workforce.

Even with protective equipment, some health workers said they were fearful of the virus. Amarylis, a 39-year-old emergency nurse at the hospital in the



PARIS: A man wearing a protective face mask walks on the Champs-Élysées avenue in Paris yesterday while a strict lockdown comes into effect to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the country. — AFP

southeastern city of Valence said she had just discovered that a 90-year-old patient she had been in contact with over the weekend had tested positive. In her department a colleague has already contracted the disease. Amarylis worries about how to protect her family and has decided not to see her children for 15 days as a precaution.

But her fears are not enough to dissuade her from

going to work. "If we don't go, who will go in our place?" Eva Defix, a 36-year-old emergency nurse at the Puy-en-Velay hospital in southern France, said she was "a little afraid" because the best countermeasure against the new coronavirus is isolation. "We bathe in it permanently, 12 hours in a row," said the mother of two daughters, three and six. "That inevitably generates anxiety." — AFP



More than 5,000 people recorded as infected

News in brief

Biden wins Washington State

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden has won the Democratic primary in Washington State. US media have projected, in another boost for the frontrunner who is hoping to build an insurmountable lead over rival Bernie Sanders. After most of the votes were counted on Monday night, NBC and the New York Times called the result - a narrow victory for Biden, who is up against Sanders for the chance to challenge President Donald Trump in November. They said that former vice president Biden had won 37.9 percent of the vote, with the leftist Sanders close behind with 36.4 percent. The result came as millions of Americans were due to troop to polling stations in three more states yesterday, with anxiety running high over the fast-spreading coronavirus that has killed more than 80 people in the US so far. —AFP

Iran bans fire festival

TEHRAN: Iranian police have banned celebrations marking the country's traditional Persian New Year fire festival as part of efforts to stop a deadly coronavirus outbreak, state media reported. Chaharshanbe Soori falls on the last Wednesday of the Iranian year before New Year's eve, which is on March 20 this year. Celebrations started yesterday evening with Iranians traditionally jumping over fires and lighting fireworks, with many suffering burns resulting in hospitalization. Iran has been scrambling to contain the new coronavirus outbreak which has killed 988 people and infected more than 16,000 since last month, according to the latest government figures. — AFP

Zimbabwe VP in China

HARARE: Zimbabwe's vice president Constantino Chiwenga was flown at the weekend to China for medical checks, an official said yesterday. Presidential spokesman George Charamba told AFP Chiwenga, a former army general who led President Emmerson Mnangagwa's rise to power following a brief military takeover in 2017, "flew back to China for his medical checkup". Chiwenga spent four months undergoing treatment in China last year and returned home in November. Charamba said Chiwenga had suffered from fatigue in recent days explaining his absence from a function attended by top government officials at Mnangagwa's farm. "He was feeling a bit indisposed but he was quite cheerful when he left for China on Sunday," he said. Chiwenga, 64, was admitted in a South African hospital last year for a constricted oesophagus. —AFP

Minister diagnosed with virus

WARSAW: Poland's government was under quarantine yesterday after one minister tested positive for the novel coronavirus as authorities introduced sweeping measures to combat the spread of the disease. All members of the government who attended a March 10 meeting had been tested and the results should be known today, said Michal Dworkczyk, head of the prime minister's chancellery. "Until that time, all these people remain in quarantine," he told Polish Radio. Poland's Environment Minister Michal Wos said Monday he was under quarantine after testing positive for the novel coronavirus, adding that he was feeling fine. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki was among the 15 government members under self-quarantine yesterday, along with the ministers of health, defense, interior, justice and culture, Dworkczyk said. —AFP

Military roadblocks and curfews: Latin America tightens virus controls

LIMA: Countries around Latin America tightened restrictions on Monday to slow the spread of the new coronavirus, with Peru putting military personnel on the streets. Costa Rica and Colombia closing their borders and other countries ordering curfews. While the region has yet to be hit as hard as Asia or Europe, Latin American governments have moved aggressively to contain the virus that has shut down cities and international transport hubs and battered its financial markets.

Still, not all are moving at the same tempo. A diplomatic tiff erupted when El Salvador's president accused Mexico of allowing people with the virus to board a flight due to leave Mexico City for San Salvador. Mexico denied it. In Colombia, authorities have overcome frosty relations with Venezuela to start sharing information about the coronavirus with their neighbor, but said that did not amount to politically recognizing the government of Nicolas Maduro.

Colombian President Ivan Duque also said the country would close its maritime, land and river borders from yesterday to prevent the spread of the highly contagious and sometimes fatal respiratory disease, with plans to keep them shut until May 30. Duque's move was followed by tougher measures from Maduro, who ordered the widening of a social quarantine across the whole of Venezuela, starting on Tuesday, after the total number of cases in the country doubled to 33.

The coronavirus has been slower to reach Latin America than much of the world. Globally, over



LIMA: Travelers await for their flights out of Peru at the Jorge Chavez international airport in Callao, Lima, minutes before borders are closed. President Martin Vizcarra has announced a State of Emergency and a two-week nationwide home-stay curfew together with the closure of all borders on account of the coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic declared by the United Nations World Health Organization. —AFP

174,100 people have been infected and nearly 6,700 have died. In Peru, President Martin Vizcarra said leaders from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil spoke via conference call on Monday to analyze the situation and coordinate actions against the pandemic.

"We have agreed that together we are going to join forces," he told reporters at the government palace, adding countries would look to coordinate demand for medical supplies and to calculate the economic impact on the region. In Chile, at least six passengers from a cruise ship named the Silver Explorer were being treated in hospitals in Patagonia after they tested positive for coronavirus, the government said.

In Lima, masked military personnel blocked major roads, while police restricted the movement of people, as the country rolled out a state of enforced "social isolation". Peru has suspended constitutional

rights such as free movement and assembly, although the government has said it will guarantee the operation of supermarkets, pharmacies, banks, basic services and the transportation of merchandise.

In nearby Paraguay, which has eight cases of the virus so far, the government said it would enforce a curfew from 8 pm daily to restrict crowds. Certain people, including those doing vital work, delivering food or transportation could continue to move around, Paraguay's interior minister, Euclides Acevedo, told a news conference. Ecuadorean President Lenin Moreno said the Andean country would begin a curfew yesterday evening and shut down most normal activities with exceptions for health, safety, banking, and food production and distribution. Panama's government said it had now reported 69 cases of the coronavirus infection, up from 55 on Sunday. — Reuters

Ticking time bombs! US jails raise alarm

NEW YORK: Comparing crowded US jails to "ticking time bombs," defense lawyers are urging law enforcement officials to release more defendants on bail while they await trial amid the coronavirus pandemic - an approach that has already been adopted by San Francisco and Philadelphia. The Federal Defenders of New York, which represents defendants who cannot afford a lawyer, wrote in a letter on Sunday that prosecutors should not engage in "business as usual" when deciding whether to recommend jail for defendants awaiting trial.

"Absent extraordinary circumstances, namely cases that involve an imminent threat of violence, it does not advance public safety to add more people to our local jails," the organization's director, David Patton, wrote in the letter to federal judges and prosecutors in Manhattan and Brooklyn. "I truly believe the jails are ticking time bombs," Patton said. Patton told Reuters on Monday that his office had filed several motions asking that incarcerated defendants be released be-

cause of the coronavirus.

The Bureau of Prisons (BOP), which runs federal prisons and jails, had no immediate comment. On Friday the BOP announced a suspension of visits and inmate transfers, among other measures to contain the virus, saying it was coordinating with experts inside and outside the agency. Public defenders in Minnesota are making a similar push to keep clients awaiting trial out of jails, which some experts say are particularly susceptible to contagion because of crowding, unhygienic conditions, and the constant turnover of detainees.

"All of us - every position - need to work together to get our clients out of the jails," Minnesota's chief public defender Bill Ward said in an e-mail to colleagues obtained by Reuters and first reported by the Star-Tribune. The requests come as law enforcement officials debate how to limit the spread of the coronavirus among the millions of people in jails, prisons, immigrant detention centers, and other facilities around the country.

Magistrate Judge James Orenstein in Brooklyn on Thursday refused to jail a man who was under house arrest, even though the defendant had failed drug tests while awaiting trial for possession of methamphetamine. Orenstein said that sending him to Brooklyn's Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC) would pose a "risk to the community" in light of the outbreak. — Reuters

US shuts down to fight coronavirus

NEW YORK: The United States began restricting citizens' movements Monday in a major escalation of attempts to contain the deadly coronavirus pandemic, as President Donald Trump warned the crisis could last well into the summer. New Jersey state and San Francisco announced curfews and Trump asked Americans to restrict gatherings to groups of fewer than 10 as the US dramatically ramped up efforts to stop the spread of the fast-moving outbreak.

Trump acknowledged for the first time that the US economy "may be" heading into a recession because of the pandemic that has killed more than 7,000 people worldwide as Wall Street stocks had their worst day since 1987, plunging almost 13 percent.

As America followed European nations in shutting down schools, public buildings, cinemas, restaurants and bars, Trump suggested the crisis would last several months at least in the United States. "So it seems to me that if we do a really good job... people are talking about July, August, something like that," Trump told reporters at the White House. "So it could be right in that pe-

riod of time where it, I say, it washes through."

Election disruption

His comments came after Canada announced it was closing its borders to most foreign travelers and New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy said he was restricting movement across the state, which borders New York City. "Effective tonight, all other non-essential retail, recreational, and entertainment businesses MUST CLOSE after 8:00 PM," said Murphy.

"All non-essential and non-emergency travel in New Jersey is strongly discouraged between the hours of 8:00 PM and 5:00 AM. This will remain in effect for the foreseeable future. We want everyone to be home - and not out," he added. Later, San Francisco passed a "remain-in-place" order requiring millions of residents to stay at home unless absolutely essential.

Before the twin announcements, only the US territory of Puerto Rico had imposed a curfew, from 9pm to 5am - along with the closure of malls, movie theaters, gyms and bars. The White House denied reports that Trump was considering a nationwide lockdown but the president said he might ask the military to help build temporary hospitals. He added that postponing elections over the coronavirus crisis was "unnecessary," even as Ohio's governor called for the state's presidential primary vote scheduled to be delayed. — AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18, 2020

10 Philippines first country to suspend all markets as coronavirus spreads**11** Coronavirus and oil price crash: Kuwait needs a swift DRS**11** Virus-stricken airlines face bailout or bust

FTSE	5,151.08	-215.03	FANG	2,667.77	-334.25	GDX	21.27	2.27
RLX	1,969.85	-217.43	BRNT	29.71	-4.14	XSD	73.42	-9.41
DRG	539.55	-43.58	GOLD	1,496.90	-19.80	KBE	27.52	-3.71
WTI	138.31	-2.32	REIT	1,628.02	-290.95			



NEW YORK: US President Trump is displayed on a television on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) on Monday in New York City. — AFP

'D' word rears head as recession feared

Coronavirus shockwaves rippling through US stocks

NEW YORK: The coronavirus shockwaves rippling through US stocks are forcing investors to contemplate outcomes more dire than a recession, including several quarters of declining economic activity, a credit crisis or even a depression. The rising global toll from the pandemic and the uncertainty over how far it may spread has left investors and economists scrambling to gauge the financial fallout.

"This market looks like it has already priced in most of a garden variety recession," said Frances Donald, global chief economist at Manulife Investment Management. "It is now on top of that having to price in some probability of a credit crisis."

Forecasters at Goldman Sachs and other banks are now projecting a steep economic contraction in at least the second quarter as governments in the United States and Europe start shutting restaurants, closing schools and calling on citizens to stay home. But there is hope among some economists that economy will start expanding again later this year—depending in part on efforts to contain the virus, known as Covid-19.

The S&P 500 on average has fallen 28 percent from peak to trough during recessions, according to an analysis of the past 70 years from Keith Lerner, chief market strategist at Truist/SunTrust Advisory

Services. As of Monday's close, the benchmark index had declined 29.5 percent from its Feb. 19 closing record high. But the market's plunge was much deeper over a decade ago during the financial crisis, with the S&P 500 tumbling more than 50 percent.

"A 2008-like financial contagion is not yet priced into this market," Donald said, but she added the market "probably won't have any reassurance that we have avoided that 2008-type scenario completely until we see a calming of credit spreads and the pace of Covid-19 cases starts to decline."

Stocks crumbled anew on Monday a day after the Federal Reserve took emergency action designed to cushion the economy, using tools similar to those the central bank deployed to help the country emerge from the 2007-2009 financial crisis.

The market's reaction on Monday after the Fed's "drastic action" is "a sign of a total breakdown of confidence," said Peter Cardillo, chief market economist at Spartan Capital Securities. "That's raising the question of how steep of a recession are we going to endure."

Prolonged slump?

Joachim Fels, PIMCO's global economic advisor,

said in a written commentary that a global recession appeared to be a "foregone conclusion" and that the task for governments and central banks was to ensure that the recession "stays relatively short-lived and doesn't morph into an economic depression." Fels loosely defined a depression as "a combination of a prolonged slump of activity that last longer than just a few quarters, a very significantly rise in unemployment, and mass business bankruptcies and bank failures." Data out of China, where the pathogen originated late last year, underscored just how much economic damage the disease had already done with industrial output plunging 13.5 percent and retail sales 20.5 percent. At least one other big Wall Street name appears concerned that the current crisis could snowball into something bigger than a recession.

Billionaire investor Ray Dalio, whose main Bridgewater Associates LP hedge fund fell sharply amid the coronavirus-led market rout, is worried that the Fed and other central banks may have already expended a good deal of their firepower by cutting rates to near zero.

In a note on Monday, Dalio said he had been concerned that the next economic downturn would "lead to hitting the 0 percent interest rate floor with a lot of debt outstanding and big wealth and political gaps

in the same way that configuration of events happened in the 1930s." Strategists at Deutsche Bank said in a note last week that the market's recent volatility, marked by the swings of over 3 percent in the S&P 500, was coming at "a frequency previously seen only in the Great Financial Crisis and the Great Depression."

Following the Fed's action, Wall Street's focus is now on what fiscal policies governments will enact, and even more so, on what can be done to contain the virus. "Nothing else matters if we can't get this under control," said Eric Winograd, chief US economist at AllianceBernstein.

The market's pullback has taken the S&P 500 down to the level it was last at in late 2018 and mid-2017. "I don't think it is quite pricing in a prolonged depression scenario at this stage and I think it is probably appropriate not to," Winograd said. "That's not the base case."

However, Winograd said he was concerned the situation could turn into a "durable recession" that stems in part from distress in the banking sector. "If we end up in a multiple-quarter level decline, I would expect there still to be significant downside for the market." — Reuters

Oil drifts below \$30, US stocks bounce back

LONDON: Oil prices drifted below \$30 per barrel, and the dollar bounced back from heavy losses against the euro. Meanwhile, US stocks rebounded yesterday following Wall Street's sharpest daily drop in more than three decades, while equities elsewhere wobbled as governments and central banks scramble to try and calm the coronavirus panic.

Price of Kuwaiti crude oil shed \$3.30, settling at \$32.16 pb Monday against \$35.46 pb last Friday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. In global markets, prices took another nosedive as the already growing fear of the coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to grow. Brent crude went down by \$3.36, settling at \$30.50 pb, while the West Texas Intermediate lost \$2.08 to land at \$29.65 pb. km.hb

Oil prices resumed their fall after Monday's collapse that saw Brent plunging more than 12 percent to a four-year low. Both Brent and WTI have now slid below \$30 per barrel. Adding to the weakness in crude markets is the price war between major



FRANKFURT: The display board of the German Stock Market Index DAX at the stock exchange market in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. — AFP

producers Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Wall Street stock indices pushed higher at the opening bell, with the Dow adding 1.7 percent, after having collapsed Monday in their worst day since 1987. The S&P 500 and Nasdaq dropped about 12 percent and the Dow nearly 13 percent, as measures taken by central banks and governments to contain the outbreak of the coronavirus were taken to highlight the depth of the crisis.

Sentiment was helped yesterday by reports that US President Donald Trump will

ask Congress to approve a massive \$850 billion emergency spending package to contain the growing economic damage from the coronavirus pandemic that will include a payroll tax cut and a bailout for airlines. European stock markets surged around five percent in early deals yesterday before erasing their gains. "As has been the case every time the European markets have tried to rebound, it is not going to be smooth sailing," noted Connor Campbell, analyst at Spreadex trading group. — Agencies

Companies hit pause button as economy infected

PARIS: Layoffs and cutting costs... companies are trying to adapt as the coronavirus hits demand and the draconian measures taken to contain the spread of the illness undercut both production and demand.

With the economic impact of the coronavirus threatening the survival of many firms, governments have pledged tens of billions to help them limp along, or failing that, to bankroll outright rescues or nationalization if necessary. Here are some measures companies have implemented.

Suspending production

Several industrial giants, in particular in the automobile industry, have moved to reduce or even suspend their production. French automobile manufacturer Peugeot-Citroen is shutting down all of its production sites in Europe, and Italian-US carmaker Fiat Chrysler with which it is in the process of merging, intends to close most of its facilities in Europe.

Germany's VW said yesterday it would shutter most of its European plants for two to three weeks.

France's Renault plans to halt four of its Spanish factories that employ nearly 10,000 people. Tyre giant Michelin is halting production at its sites in Spain, France and Italy for at least a week. Airbus said it was suspending work at its French and Spanish plants for four days to take measures to improve workplace safety in light of the coronavirus.

Even the luxury industry is taking steps. Gucci, part of the Kering group, is closing all of its sites until March 20. Meanwhile Hermes is shutting its manufacturing sites until the end of the month.

Reduced working hours, forced leave

Italian shipyard Fincantieri, which has asked employees who have accumulated extra time off to use it. Air France says it will look at reducing working hours, a measure that several countries have facilitated with easier access to state benefits for workers now forced into part-time work. —AFP

They have taken different measures to adapt. Russian airline Aeroflot has asked employees who have accumulated extra time off to use it. Air France says it will look at reducing working hours, a measure that several countries have facilitated with easier access to state benefits for workers now forced into part-time work. —AFP

Business

Philippines first country to suspend all markets as coronavirus spreads

Currency trading to resume March 18

MANILA/SINGAPORE: The Philippine Stock Exchange closed indefinitely yesterday while currency and bond trading were suspended, the first shutdown of markets worldwide in response to the coronavirus, with authorities citing risks to the safety of traders. The move comes after some bourses around the world closed trading floors or paused trade after big falls in market value.

It is also open-ended, unlike China's extension of Lunar New Year holidays in January, which delayed the resumption of trade, or the run of holidays declared in Sri Lanka this week to try and halt the virus, which has closed markets there since Monday. And while the Philippine shutdown was prompted by health reasons, amid a broad nationwide lockdown, it raises the prospect other exchanges may follow.

"Given the unprecedented speed of the slump in equity prices, it has been suggested that stock exchanges might be closed soon if things don't turn around," research house Capital Economics said in a note yesterday.

Global markets are in meltdown as the pandemic spreads, with roughly \$14 trillion in shareholder value erased and even safe assets such as gold have been sold to cover losses. AdMacro research head Patrick Perret-Green had also raised the possibility in a note issued over the weekend, before the Philippines move. "We have seen it before. I believe we could see it

again," he said. "Governments do not need or want the added stress and distraction at this time."

The Philippine Stock Exchange said trade was suspended until further notice "to ensure the safety of employees and traders," amid a broader national lockdown. National Treasurer Rosalia de Leon cited the lockdown as the reason for the suspension of fixed income trade. Currency trading is to resume on March 18.

In Malaysia, where a similar lockdown comes into force on March 18, the securities regulator said all capital markets will operate as usual. Settlement of trades in Sri Lanka is due to be available on March 18, though it is unclear if trade will resume before the nation is set to return from holidays on Friday.

CME Group Inc last week shut its storied trading floor in Chicago, to reduce large gatherings, and Mideast bourses have taken similar measures, though electronic trade remains available.

Reprieve or risky?

Opinions are divided, though, on whether a suspension of a stock market that includes giant conglomerates like San Miguel Corp, can actually support sentiment. Renzo Louie Candano, analyst at DBP-Daiwa Capital Markets in Manila, said it would give investors time to evaluate whether the sell-off is warranted. Others say it could exacerbate



MANILA: People maintain social distancing as they queue to get on a train on the first work day in the country's capital since its lockdown to contain coronavirus, in Quezon City, Metro Manila. — Reuters

volatility when trading does resume, while possibly hurting the government's ability to raise funds in the bond market.

"With markets closed, it would be puzzling how additional government bonds would be issued and received by markets," said Ken Peng, head of Asia investment strategy at Citi Private Bank.

"Especially when investors cannot get liquidity out

of their stock and bond holdings."

The Philippines benchmark index fell 8 percent on Monday and is down 20 percent for March so far, already its worst month since October 2008, while bond prices have also collapsed. The yield on 10-year government debt, which rises when prices fall, jumped 63 basis points on Monday, the sharpest rise since September 2018. — Reuters

Goldman sees China economy shrinking 9% in Q1

BEIJING/SHANGHAI: Goldman Sachs said yesterday that China's economy will likely shrink 9 percent in the first quarter, underscoring how the coronavirus has disrupted normal business activities, while China reported an uptick in new cases of the disease, most of them imported.

Goldman cut its estimate for China's first-quarter gross domestic product growth to a 9 percent contraction, from a previous forecast of 2.5 percent growth, citing "strikingly weak" economic data in January and February that was reported on Monday. It also lowered its full-year GDP forecast to 3 percent growth from an earlier estimate of 5.5 percent.

For the fourth straight day, imported coronavirus cases in China outnumbered cases of local transmission. The rising risk of imported cases has prompted some parts of the country to tighten monitoring of foreign travellers, and the Chinese foreign ministry on Tuesday advised its citizens to avoid travel to high-risk countries. Mainland China had 21 new confirmed cases on Monday, the National Health Commission said, up from 16 a day earlier. Of the new cases, 20 involved infected travellers from abroad.

Raising further concerns about spread of the disease, a man recently returned from Spain has tested positive for the virus - despite showing no symptoms - and has been put under observation and into quarantine, according to a statement on the website of the city of Mianyang, Sichuan.

An additional 25 passengers who had shared a flight with the man and two of his family members have also been subject to quarantine, the statement said. In contrast to the growing number of imported cases, main-



WUYI, China: This photo taken on March 15, 2020 shows workers pouring molten steel at a foundry in Wuyi, China's eastern Zhejiang province. China's industrial production, retail sales and investment all contracted in the first two months of the year after the coronavirus epidemic wreaked havoc on the economy, official data showed. — AFP

land China had only one case of locally transmitted infection on Monday, in Wuhan, capital of central Hubei province where the flu-like disease appeared in humans late last year.

The capital Beijing accounted for nine of the imported new cases even as it imposed tough restrictions to screen out and isolate infections coming from abroad. Beijing Capital International Airport has cordoned off a special zone for all international flights, with all disembarking passengers required to submit to health checks.

Transit passengers were sent to their connecting flights, while non-transit passengers were shuttled to a nearby processing venue from which they were dispatched to designated places for compulsory 14-day quarantine. Beijing also closed its new Daxing airport to international flights and redirected them to the older Capital International Airport in the northeast of the city, in order to contain any new infections in one facility.

On Tuesday, Shanghai extended existing quarantine measures to travellers who have recently visited the United Kingdom,

Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria.

China's eastern Shandong province and southwestern Chongqing city will require all overseas arrivals to be quarantined in designated locations or residences for 14 days, the official Xinhua news agency said yesterday.

In the central city of Wuhan officials said they would begin requiring overseas arrivals to undergo 14-day quarantine at a central location at the people's own cost, emulating Beijing. Wuhan, a transport and industrial hub of 11 million people, is the epicenter of China's outbreak and the origin of the pandemic that has now infected more than 100,000 people beyond China's borders.

Officials in the city initially tried to cover up the outbreak when it began late last year, but Beijing has lately sought to emphasize the positive role China has played in controlling the global spread of the disease. An editorial in the official China Daily said the rest of the world should learn from China and follow the principles of early detection, early quarantine and early treatment. — Reuters

As panic selloff grips investors, their kids need lunch

SAN FRANCISCO: As Wall Street suffered its worst one-day rout in three decades on Monday, financial professionals managed the historic selloff with the added distraction of children needing lunch and dogs barking to be let out.

The S&P 500 tumbled 12 percent in its worst one-day drop since October 1987, just as growing numbers of investors began to work from home to slow the spread of the coronavirus that is already widely expected to throw the US economy into a downturn. Investors juggled emergency conference calls with domestic duties as schools across the country closed to avoid spreading the virus.

Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley announced programs last week for working remotely to stem the spread of the disease. Several banks have banned travel and taken other measures after cases of coronavirus were detected at firms including Barclays, BlackRock Inc, Citigroup Inc and JP-Morgan Chase.

Trip Miller, a managing partner of

German economy on 'red alert'

BERLIN: The mood among German investors slumped in March to levels last seen at the beginning of the world financial crisis in autumn 2008 due to alarm at the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on Europe's largest economy, a survey showed yesterday.

The ZEW research institute's monthly survey showed economic sentiment among investors collapsed to -49.5 from 8.7 in February. This was the biggest drop since the survey began in 1991. Economists had expected a drop to -26.4. "The economy is on red alert," said ZEW President Achim Wambach in a statement, adding that financial experts expect the economy to shrink in the first quarter and think a contraction is also very likely in the second quarter.

A separate gauge measuring investors' assessment of the economy's current conditions decreased to -43.1 from -15.7. Analysts had forecast a reading of -30.0. For 2020 as a whole, most investors currently expect a decline in real GDP growth of about 1 percent as a result of the pandemic, Wambach said. The spread of the coronavirus has ended hopes of a first-quarter upswing on the back of a solid increase in retail sales and a jump in industrial production in January.

But with the coronavirus infecting a

Gullane Capital Partners, spent much of the day at his dining room table in Memphis, Tennessee, where he talked, emailed and texted with colleagues and investors as they monitored the rapid selloff and their portfolio of about 16 long positions and a similar number of shorts. "Meanwhile, I had a four-year-old and a seven-year-old asking me to cut their pizza," Miller joked, adding he does not expect the market to improve until the coronavirus outbreak shows signs of containment.

The latest tumble on the US stock market was despite the Federal Reserve's surprise move late Sunday to cut interest rates to near zero, its second emergency cut in less than two weeks as it struggles to defend the longest US economic expansion on record, now in its 11th year.

"We are in full panic mode. Until comfort returns, panic kind of dies down, I think we are going to continue to have big moves," warned Jim Paulsen, chief financial strategist at the Leuthold Group in Minneapolis. Monday's historic drop followed a 9.3 percent surge on Friday and a 9.5 percent plunge on Thursday. Overall, the S&P 500 has plummeted nearly 30 percent from its record high on Feb. 19, and many investors are reluctant to predict when the selling will end.

Quincy Krosby, chief market strategist at Prudential Financial in Newark, New Jersey, said that while she often works from home she missed being among her colleagues during Monday's market carnage. — Reuters

growing number of people and leading to unprecedented measures to slow its spread, officials said the government now expects gross domestic product to shrink this year, in what would be the first contraction since the world financial crisis in 2009.

Volkswagen said on Monday it was preparing to shut down its factories to curb the spread of the coronavirus and warned that 2020 would be a very difficult year. The slump is expected to drive down tax revenues while also requiring a massive increase in state spending to help companies and save jobs.

Policy support

Jack Allen-Reynolds from Capital Economics said the ZEW survey pointed to a large decline in GDP. "Things are likely to get much worse in Q2, when we expect much bigger quarterly falls in GDP than during the depths of the global financial crisis," he added.

The ZEW figures suggested that the German economy could shrink by as much as 4 percent on the year in 2020, he said. "So a considerable amount of additional policy support from the ECB and governments will be necessary." Chancellor Angela Merkel has vowed to do everything necessary to slow the spread of the coronavirus and counter its impact on the economy, saying that the pledge of not taking on new debt was now secondary. The federal government has budget reserves of more than 48 billion euros (\$53 billion) and could raise up to 35 billion euros of new debt if Berlin decided to ditch its balanced budget goal in the course of the year. — Reuters

UK retailer Laura Ashley goes under

LONDON: Laura Ashley said yesterday it intends to appoint administrators as the coronavirus outbreak has had an immediate and significant impact on the UK retailer's performance, sending its shares down more than 64 percent.

British retailers have faced challenges in the past few years and Laura Ashley, a favourite of late Princess Diana in its 1980s heyday, has seen sales fall, store closures, weakness at its home furnishings business and a worsening consumer mood. The company said it is in advanced talks for third-party debt funding but it would not be able to draw down additional funds from lenders in time. Its largest shareholder, MUI Asia, will not be able to provide financial support either.

The clothing and furnishing retailer is the latest in a list of brands considered the mainstay of British shopping scene to go under. House of Fraser and department store chain Debenhams have also been placed in administration.

Trading in the business for seven weeks



LIVERPOOL: A shopper passes the front entrance of the Laura Ashley womenswear and homewear store in Aintree, Liverpool, north-west England yesterday. British clothing and household goods retailer Laura Ashley Holdings collapsed yesterday into administration as rescue talks failed due to coronavirus turmoil, risking up to 2,700 jobs. — AFP

to March 13 improved by 24 percent compared to last year but the pandemic has kept many shoppers away. Laura Ashley intends to appoint Robert Lewis and Zelf Hussain as administrators and said it was

not certain whether there would be any surplus assets available for shareholders of the company. Shares in the company, which will be suspended, had fallen to 0.03 pence by 1108 GMT. — Reuters

Business

Markaz oil market report

Coronavirus and oil price crash: Kuwait needs a swift DRS

Oil price collapse indicates a fundamental shift in oil market policies

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz" stated yesterday that Kuwait has been simultaneously hit by a coronavirus scare and oil price collapse. Therefore, Kuwait needs a swift Disaster Recovery Strategy (DRS) to contain the fear and impact.

How coronavirus is spreading beyond China

Coronavirus (COVID-19) was initially detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019 is what appeared to be a containable disease. However, as days progressed the speed with which the virus spread within China alarmed the world but there was no panic as people still believed it to be a China centric issue. However, global supply chain was disrupted and global growth forecast was revised downwards although marginally. However, when the disease spread to Iran, Italy, Japan and South Korea, panic set in impacting global travel, business functions, healthcare systems, etc. As Kuwait reported cases of COVID-19, the response was swift in terms of cancelling flights to and from certain destinations, closure of schools, and preparing hospitals as part of a bigger contingency plan.

Crisis Management & Disaster Recovery Strategy

The Novel Coronavirus (also referred to as the Covid-19) has created a panic-like situation in almost all parts of the world including Kuwait. It has triggered a crisis that is impacting many areas including schools, hospitals, offices, airports, and other vital points across the nation. The management of this crisis should be through a Disaster Recovery Strategy (DRS) that can enable Kuwait to tackle the issues that arise in a more organized manner. A properly conceived DRS can enable resumption of services following a crisis, and hence an emergency communication plan is integral to a DRS, just as good and swift communication can calm nerves easily and enable people to return to normal routine at the earliest. While the suggested DRS is focused on current Coronavirus issue, the concept of DRS should be a permanent one so that Kuwait can face future crisis with minimal dislocation.

In addition, given the Coronavirus scare and its impact, Kuwait's healthcare and medical system is under intense pressure. The main effects on the healthcare will be in the form of consumables (e.g. masks, PCR test kits, sanitizers, etc.), capacity in terms of ICU rooms, human resources (medical, paramedical size and morale given the social media

assaults against certain nationalities) and governance (good management, conflict of interest and utilization time of facilities of low priority cases such as plastic surgeries).

How the oil price war drama unfolded

Crude oil price fell nearly 30 percent to \$36/bbl and market experts feel there is more to come. What triggered this massive price fall is the decision by Saudi Arabia to increase its production and supply and reduce the price in order to gain market share. The move was primarily triggered after Russia refused to make more production cuts as a response to Coronavirus threat to global demand. The sudden move of Saudi Arabia came at an unexpected time when global demand has weakened considerably sparking even recessionary fears. Back in 2014 when Saudi Arabia pursued this strategy of increasing the production to drive out the shale producers, it did not succeed.

In this price war, obviously there are more losers than winners. While broadly oil-consuming nations like China and India will benefit, low oil price on the back of weak demand will severely hurt oil-exporting countries including Kuwait. According to analysts, the new low oil price will severely hurt the U.S. Shale producers as well as they are now more indebted than before with weaker balance sheets. U.S. energy companies account for 11 percent share in the overall junk bond market issuances.

How this affects Kuwait

Coming to Kuwait specifically, the first impact will

- Kuwait has been simultaneously hit by a Coronavirus scare and oil price collapse.
- Coronavirus threat has now spread beyond China and is gripping most part of the world with panic.
- Kuwait needs a swift Disaster Recovery Strategy (DRS) to contain the fear and impact.
- GCC economies including Kuwait continues to be funded by petrodollars that makes the economic model highly oil price dependent and therefore unsustainable.
- While Kuwait is endowed with adequate financial reserves to face these challenges, this should not induce complacency and prevent it from launching reforms to make the economic and social model sustainable for future generations.

be widening budget deficit. Kuwait projected a deficit budget (post-FG transfer) of KD 9.2 billion (21.4 percent of 2020e GDP) at an assumed oil price of \$55/bbl. That projection can go wrong and a widening fiscal deficit will result in more reserves drained out of General Reserve of Government of Kuwait as it currently has a problem borrowing from international markets due to non-passage of the Debt law in the parliament. The low oil price will also affect stock market performance. While the premier market (total return) index of Kuwait Stock exchange posted gains of 12.3 percent and 37.3 percent in 2018 and 2019 respectively, so far during the year it has lost 24.6 percent, of which 19.3 percent loss was experienced on two days (March 08 and 09). Kuwait is also trying to attract foreign direct investment in order to diversify its economy and this will be impacted now.

While these are the impact points at the broader economy level, we need to look at how this will impact other sectors including the private sector and SME's. In its quest to diversify the economy and create jobs, the Government looks upon private sector to be in the forefront to create jobs. However, lower oil price will mean lesser government spending in general and lower project spending in particular and this will affect the private sector non-oil growth. Moreover, small and medium enterprises will be the immediate casualty as their ability to withstand crises is limited by their size and performance. It should be noted that SME's contribute 3 percent of GDP and account for 23 percent of jobs (Ref: World Bank, 2016). Encouraging and nurturing an entrepreneurship culture at all times is essential

for diversifying the economy away from oil.

Policy options should be different and swift

In situations where budget deficit will widen beyond control, normal policy response is to curtail expenditure or increase non-oil revenues (like taxes) or both. Citizens of Kuwait enjoy a social contract that guarantees jobs, healthcare and retirement. Efforts to curtail expenditure or impose taxes will dent this social contract. Bulk of the expenditure in Kuwait is on account of salaries to government employees and subsidies. There is vast scope to improve the efficiency of government services and reduce corruption as a means of controlling expenditure. Imposing burden on citizens without tackling these vexing long-term issues can create social disillusionment.

There are many policy options available at this point in time to tackle oil price collapse. First and foremost, in order to comfort private sector and SME's the government can initiate countercyclical investment program to support liquidity. This investment program at the national level (in what can be called as National Investment Program) should aim to use government reserves to support private sector and SME's more during crisis periods (like this) and probably a little less when times turn good. However, having a robust National Investment Program is at the heart of tackling the sustainability issue for the country. While investments could be counter cyclical, reforms should not be. Economic reforms especially in key sectors like education and healthcare should be pursued, measured and reported at all times to make steady progress in global competitive rankings. The reforms would be aimed at making business environment friendly and easy to operate both for domestic and foreign investors.

Oil price collapse is always a serious warning sign for oil dependent economies like Kuwait. The world is moving towards clean energy, significant improvements in energy efficiency and cost gains have been reported on alternative energy sources like solar. Energy market may thus move to a structural change where global oil dependency can reduce rapidly. In light of these, it is wrong to assume that Kuwait has adequate time and resources on hand to act.

What makes the current time very challenging is the double whammy of a combination of a disease spread threat alongside oil price collapse. It is fair to assume that both are temporary challenges with long-term implications for Kuwait healthcare industry and its economy.

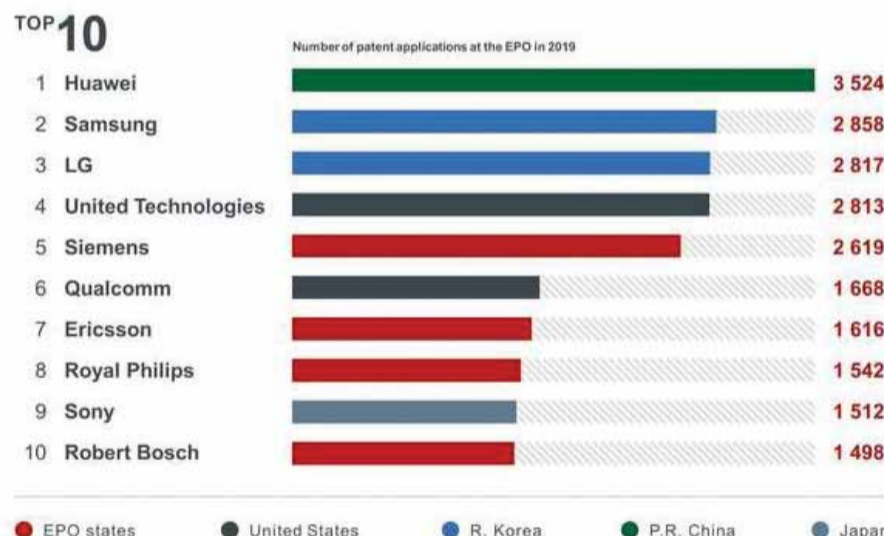
Huawei tops Europe patent applications

KUWAIT: According to a new report by the European Patent Office, Huawei—a leading global provider of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and smart devices—filed more patent applications in Europe than any other company last year, pioneering the development of solutions to support digital transformation worldwide.

Of its patent applications, around two thirds of those were in the field of digital communications, including the development of 5G technology. Huawei has already been leading 5G expansion globally, now focusing on vertical industry, ecosystem, and 5G talent development in 2020.

Huawei filed 3,524 patent applications in total, far more than the next highest company, and by far the largest filer of digital communications patents. The report noted that U.S., Chinese and European companies each contributed about a quarter of all applications in digital communications. Appli-

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cations by Chinese firms have risen nearly six-fold since 2010. Earlier this year, the European Union issued a set of guidelines, referred to as the "5G toolbox", that allowed Huawei to continue participating in Europe's 5G roll out despite pressure from the current US administration.

It becomes clear why Huawei expressed

so self-confident through the founder and many other executives against the sanctions of the US government, which Huawei put on the black list, the Chinese were cut off by many suppliers. The company invested heavily in its own development and research in order to become more independent of supply chains.

Volkswagen suspends production

FRANKFURT: Volkswagen Group, the world's biggest carmaker, is suspending production at factories across Europe as the coronavirus pandemic hits sales and disrupts supply chains, the company said yesterday.

The German carmaker, which owns the Audi, Bentley, Bugatti, Ducati, Lamborghini, Porsche, Seat and Skoda brands, also said that uncertainty about the fallout from coronavirus meant it was impossible to give forecasts for its performance this year. "Given the present significant deterioration in the sales situation and the heightened uncertainty regarding parts supplies to our plants, production is to be suspended in the near future at factories operated by group brands," Chief Executive Herbert Diess said yesterday.

Volkswagen's powerful works council concluded it was not possible for workers to maintain a safe distance from each other to prevent contagion and recommended a



WOLFSBURG: The logo of German car maker Volkswagen (VW) is pictured at the company's headquarters in Wolfsburg. German auto giant Volkswagen said yesterday it was preparing to shutter most of its European plants, joining a slew of other carmakers. — AFP

suspension of production at its factories from Friday. Production will be halted at VW's Spanish plants, in Setubal in Portugal, Bratislava in Slovakia and at the Lamborghini and Ducati plants in Italy before the end of this week, Diess said.

Most of its other German and European factories will prepare to suspend production, probably for two to three weeks, while Audi said separately it would halt output at its plants in Belgium, Germany, Hungary and Mexico. Volkswagen's vast factory in

Puebla, Mexico, and plants in Brazil and the United States were not affected but that would depend on how the coronavirus spreads, VW said.

Volkswagen has 124 production sites worldwide of which 72 are in Europe, with 28 in Germany alone. "2020 will be a very difficult year. The coronavirus pandemic presents us with unknown operational and financial challenges. At the same time, there are concerns about sustained economic impacts," Diess said. — Reuters

Virus-stricken airlines face bailout or bust

SYDNEY: Airlines worldwide face an unprecedented existential threat as the coronavirus shuts down global travel, leaving governments with controversial and costly decisions about which carriers to bail out. A toxic mix of fear, crippling travel bans and investor panic have pummeled the sector, with demand collapsing and carriers cutting flight capacity by up to 90 percent.

One troubled airline, Britain's Flybe, has already gone to the wall and market analysts believe many more could follow. "By the end of May 2020, most airlines in the world will be bankrupt," market intelligence firm CAPA has warned.

Even before US President Donald Trump effectively barred trans-Atlantic travel, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) estimated the crisis would cost the industry \$113 billion, or nearly 20 percent of its revenue this year. The true figure now looks like being much higher.

Brendan Sobie, an independent aviation analyst based in Singapore, said the global situation was "unprecedented". "You can compare it to things like SARS or the global financial crisis, but I think it goes beyond that. No one really knows how long it will last and what the full impact will be."

Airlines are now sprinting to slash costs and bolster company war chests where possible—laying off staff, cutting routes, renegotiating deals with suppliers and flying smaller, cheaper-to-run planes.

Australian carrier Qantas has cut international flight capacity by 90 percent and domestic routes by 60 percent. Similarly, British Airways is slashing capacity by 75 percent.

Meanwhile, Dutch national airline KLM plans to cut up to 2,000 jobs, the CEO of Delta Air Lines has seen his salary cut to zero, and Lufthansa suspended dividends.

In an internal memo, Malaysia Airlines admitted the company was already in a "critical situation" and urged staff to take voluntary unpaid leave. "Many airlines are now at risk of going bankrupt and Malaysia Airlines is no different," chief financial officer Boo Hui Yee wrote.

Enter the taxpayer?

Against this bleak backdrop, previously hushed whispers about government bailouts have become panicked screams for help. British airlines are said to have asked the government for more than \$9 billion in support. Trade group Airlines for America has called for a \$50 billion bailout, more than triple the aid provided after the 9/11 attacks.

US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the sector would come "top of the list" for relief.

But such substantial government help could prove deeply unpopular. Many taxpayers are still bitter about Wall Street bailouts during the 2008 global financial crisis and a perceived "heads I win, tails you lose" corporate culture. "The biggest US airlines spent 96 percent of free cash flow over the last decade to buy back shares of their own stock in order to boost executive bonuses and please wealthy investors," complained former US labour secretary Robert Reich.

"Now, they expect taxpayers to bail them out to the tune of \$50 billion. It's the same old story." —AFP



SEOUL: Commercial aircraft are seen parked on the tarmac at Incheon international airport, west of Seoul, yesterday. — AFP

Coronavirus drugs: Who's doing what?

WASHINGTON: Pharmaceuticals and research labs across the world are racing to find vaccines and treatments for the new coronavirus, using a variety of different technologies. According to Benjamin Neuman, a virologist at Texas A&M University-Texarkana, immunizing against the pathogen is a long shot: There has never been a very successful human vaccine against any member of the coronavirus family. "This is going to be a lot of trial, a lot of error, but we have a lot of options to try," Neuman said.

Treatment could come sooner, with antiviral remdesivir showing early promise and already being used on an ad hoc basis before regulatory approval. US President Donald Trump has urged his scientists and drug companies to speed up the process — but experts say fundamental constraints could leave little wiggle room.

"A vaccine has to have a fundamental scientific basis. It has to be manufacturable. It has to be safe. This could take a year and a half - or much longer," wrote H. Holden Thorp, the editor-in-chief of the journal Science in response to the president's calls. "Pharmaceutical executives have every incentive to get there quickly - they will be selling the vaccine after all - but thankfully, they also know that you can't break the laws of nature to get there."

The United States is funding several companies through the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and National Institutes of Health (NIH). The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), a global organization based in Oslo, is also helping to fund many companies, mostly smaller partners that would lack the capacity to scale-up mass production. It has so far provided about \$24 million.

Firm: Gilead sciences

What it is: Treatment - When it might come: Later this year - Of all the drugs linked to the virus that causes COVID-19, Gilead's remdesivir could be the closest to market launch. It's actually not new per se but was developed to fight other viruses including Ebola (where it was shown to be ineffective) and it hasn't yet been approved for anything.

Still, it has shown early promise in treating some

coronavirus patients in China, according to doctors, and Gilead is moving ahead with final stage clinical trials in Asia (known as "Phase 3"). It has also been used to treat at least one US patient so far. NIH's Anthony Fauci, one of the top government scientists overseeing the coronavirus response, has said it could be available in the next "several months."

"There's only one drug right now that we think may have real efficacy. And that's remdesivir," said Bruce Aylward, a World Health Organization official at a recent press conference in China. Remdesivir gets modified inside the human body to become similar to one of the four building blocks of DNA, called nucleotides.

Neuman told AFP that when viruses copy themselves, they do it "quickly and a bit sloppily," meaning they might incorporate remdesivir into their structure - though human cells, which are more fastidious, won't make the same mistake. If the virus incorporates the remdesivir into itself, the drug adds unwanted mutations that can destroy the virus.

Firm: Moderna

What it is: Vaccine - (When it might come: 12-18 months) - Within weeks of Chinese researchers making the genome of the virus public, a team at the University of Texas at Austin was able to create a replica model of its spike protein, the part which attaches to and infects human cells, and image it using a cryogenic (cooled) electron microscope.

This replica itself is now the basis for a vaccine candidate because it may provoke an immune response in the human body without causing harm - the classical method for developing vaccines based on principles dating back to smallpox vaccine in 1796. NIH is also working with Moderna, a relatively new firm founded in 2010, to make a vaccine using the protein's genetic information to grow it inside human muscle tissue, rather than having to inject it in.

This information is stored in an intermediary transient substance called "messenger RNA" that carries genetic code from DNA to cells. "The advantage is that it's really fast," explained Jason McLellan, who led the UT Austin team, whereas the traditional approach

of creating the protein outside is difficult to scale and takes a long time. The vaccine began its first human trial on March 16 after being proven effective in mice. If all goes to plan, it could be available on the market in about a year and a half, ready in case the coronavirus outbreak continues until the next flu season, according to Fauci.

Firm: Regeneron

What it is: Treatment and vaccine - (When it might come: Firm timeline not yet provided) - Regeneron last year developed an intravenous drug that was shown to significantly boost survival rates among Ebola patients using what are known as "monoclonal antibodies." To do this, they genetically modified mice to give them human-like immune systems.

The mice are exposed to viruses, or weakened forms of them, in order to produce human antibodies, Christos Kyrtatos, the company's vice president of research told AFP. These antibodies are then isolated and screened to find the most potent ones, which are grown in labs, purified and given to humans intravenously. "If everything goes well, we should know what our best antibodies are within the next few weeks," with human trials to begin by summer, said Kyrtatos.

The drug could work as both a treatment and as a vaccine, by dosing up people before they are exposed - though these effects would be only temporary. In the near term, they are also trying to repurpose another of their drugs devised using the same platform called Kevzara, which is approved to treat inflammation caused by arthritis. This could help fight the lung inflammation seen in the severe forms of the COVID-19 disease - in other words fighting a symptom as opposed to the virus itself.

Firm: Sanofi

What it is: Vaccine (When it might come: Time not yet clear) - The French drugmaker is partnering with the US government to use a so-called "recombinant DNA platform" to produce a vaccine candidate. It takes the virus' DNA and combines it with DNA from a harmless virus, creating a chimera that can provoke an

immune response.

The antigens it produces can then be scaled up. The technology is already the basis of Sanofi's influenza vaccine, and believes it has a head start due to a SARS vaccine it developed that offered partial protection in animals. David Loew, the company's head of vaccines, is reported to have said Sanofi expects to have a research candidate ready for lab testing within six months and for clinical study within a year and a half.

Firm: Inovio Pharmaceuticals

What it is: Vaccine - When it might come: Emergency supplies by end of year? Inovio, another US biopharmaceutical, has since its founding in the 1980s worked on DNA vaccines - which work in a similar way to RNA vaccines explained above but work at an earlier link of the chain. As an analogy, DNA can be thought of as a reference book in a library, while RNA is like a photocopy of a page from that book containing instructions to carry out a task.

"We plan to begin human clinical trials in the US in April and soon thereafter in China and South Korea, where the outbreak is impacting the most people," said J. Joseph Kim, Inovio's president and CEO in a statement. "We plan on delivering one million doses by year end with existing resources and capacity."

Other notable efforts

British drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline has teamed up with a Chinese biotech firm, providing adjuvant platform technology. An adjuvant is added to some vaccines to enhance the immune response, thereby creating a stronger and longer lasting immunity against infections than the vaccine alone. Like Moderna, CureVac is working with the University of Queensland on a messenger RNA vaccine.

Its CEO Daniel Menichella met with the White House earlier this month, and announced the company expects to have a candidate within a few months. American pharma Johnson & Johnson is looking at repurposing some of its existing drugs to see how they might help treat the symptoms of patients already infected with the virus. — AFP

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Lifestyle | Gossip

Hanks, Wilson released from hospital after virus quarantine

Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson have been released from the Australian hospital where they were in isolation since testing positive for the coronavirus last week, their son Chet said. "A quick update on my folks: They're out of the hospital," Chet said in an Instagram video. "They're still self-quarantined obviously, but they're feeling a lot better, so that's a relief," he said. The multiple Oscar-winning actor was on the Gold Coast near Brisbane to film an Elvis Presley biopic directed by Australian Baz Luhrmann when he and Wilson, both 63, came down with the disease. Wilson, a singer-songwriter, had given concerts in Sydney and Brisbane before testing positive for COVID-19 and Australian authorities have been track-

ing the couple's contacts to identify any other people who may have been infected. Chet Hanks urged people not to panic over the virus and wished anyone else infected "a swift and speedy recovery". Australia has so far confirmed nearly 400 cases of coronavirus, with five deaths from the disease. Hanks was believed to have returned to the penthouse apartment in the Gold Coast where the couple had been staying while he worked on the Luhrmann film, in which he was due to portray Elvis' long-time manager, Colonel Tom Parker. The couple have posted to social media about their run-in with COVID-19, thanking their Australian carers and urging their fans to follow the advice of experts on avoiding the disease.

**Jennifer Lawrence** restrains 'intruder'

Jennifer Lawrence and her husband restrained an alleged intruder on Sunday. The 'Silver Linings Playbook' actress and her spouse Cooke Maroney were at their Los Angeles home when an unnamed 23-year-old woman simply walked in through their unlocked front door, hoping to meet the Oscar-winning star. According to the New York Post newspaper's Page Six column, the couple were able to restrain the woman before both the police and security staff arrived. The woman was later arrested for misdemeanor trespass. Meanwhile, Emma Stone previously revealed her friendship with Jennifer started because they had the same "stalker". The two actresses had bonded over text messages for over a year before they came face-to-face for the first time, and both women had a fleeting panic they were about to meet "John the Orchestra Guy" when they finally arranged to hang out. Emma previously explained: "Jennifer Lawrence and I both had the same stalker, John the Orchestra Guy." He would text us both and say things like 'I'm running late on my way to the soundstage. Can you warm up the orchestra for me? Text me back and let me know you got this.' 'He wasn't really a stalker. He must have worked at a studio or something, because he had a lot of people's numbers.' 'Jen and I texted for a year before we actually met. As she was driving to my house, she thought, 'Oh, my God, what if it's John the Orchestra Guy'? And I thought, 'Oh, my God, what if it's John the Orchestra Guy'? 'So Jen calls me and says, 'I just want to make sure you're not John the Orchestra Guy.' I wasn't. And we met. It's our adorable love story."

**Rexha** loses an acquaintance to coronavirus

Bebe Rexha has lost an acquaintance to coronavirus. The 30-year-old singer took to social media and urged her fans to "stay inside" after the sad death, insisting people need to do the right thing amid the ongoing global pandemic. She tweeted: "This is NOT A JOKE. A friend of a friend just died of corona at the age of 45. 'STAY INSIDE YOUR HOUSE AND DO YOUR CIVIC DUTY. PLEASE. (sic)' The 'Meant To Be' hitmaker also called on the US government to help by halting rent, utility and mortgage payments until the situation is "under control". She wrote: "The US government should put a stop to rent payments, mortgage payments and utility payments at least until the corona virus is under control." Millions of Americans are worried about keeping their jobs and their homes instead of staying safe. @realDonaldTrump (sic) Bebe has also been responding to fans concerned about the finances by asking for their cash app details so can help by sending them funds. Her kind actions follow a number of celebrities looking to do what they can, with Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds donating \$1 million to foodbanks in North America to help support their coronavirus relief efforts. The couple took to social media to pledge support for Feeding America and Food Banks Canada and revealed their huge personal donation to the cause. He wrote in an Instagram post: "Covid-19 has brutally impacted older adults and low income families. Blake and I are donating \$1 million to be split between Feeding America and Food Banks Canada. If you can give, these orgs need our help. Take care of your bodies and hearts. Leave room for joy. Call someone who's isolated and might need connection. (sic)" Their donation comes after Feeding America called for support as they tried to give food out to the less fortunate during the health crisis.

**Grande's fan** arrested for allegedly trespassing

A fan of Ariana Grande has been arrested at her home, after allegedly trying to deliver a love letter to the singer. A man in his 20s allegedly showed up to the '7 Rings' hitmaker's Los Angeles home over the weekend, where he is believed to have knocked on her front door and asked to speak with her, although she wasn't home at the time. Sources have told TMZ it's unclear how the man bypassed security measures on the grounds to get to Ariana's door, but once he did, the police were called. Law enforcement sources claim responding officers found the man near the house, and while arresting him, he allegedly spat on one of the cops. Officers also allegedly found a love note to Ariana, which included directions to her house. The man was booked for misdemeanor trespassing, as well as felony battery for the alleged spitting incident. Although Ariana wasn't home at the time of the alleged incident, she could be forced to stay inside more often as the ongoing spread of coronavirus means millions of people will have to self-isolate and distance themselves from others. Earlier this month, the 'God is a Woman' singer took to social media to urge her fans to take the global pandemic more seriously, as concerns about the spread continue to rise. She wrote on Twitter: "I understand that is how I felt weeks ago, but please read about what's going on. Don't turn a blind eye. 'The 'we will be fine because we're young' mindset is putting people who aren't young and/or healthy in a lot of danger. you sound stupid and privileged and you need to care more about others. like now. (sic)'" The singer added: "like your hip hop yoga class can wait i promise (sic)"

Perry is thinking about hiring her 'American Idol' co-stars for her wedding

Katy Perry has "thought about" hiring her 'American Idol' co-stars Lionel Richie and Luke Bryan to perform at her wedding. The 35-year-old singer previously dismissed the idea of having Lionel and Luke present at her upcoming wedding to fiancé Orlando Bloom - with whom she is expecting her first child - because she joked they would be too expensive. But now, Katy has said she's been thinking about the possibility of getting them both to perform at the nuptials, as well as having 'Idol' host Ryan Seacrest officiate the ceremony. In a joint interview with 'Entertainment Tonight', she said: "I have thought about it. I wish, I wish. That's the whole budget, honestly. Lionel, especially, is the whole budget. And with Ryan officiating? Yeah, it's over." And although their prices might be too high for the 'Never Worn White' hitmaker, the pair have insisted they'll find a way to be involved in the wedding. Katy and Orlando's wedding plans are

reportedly up in the air at the moment, as they were believed to be planning to hold their nuptials in Japan over the summer, but are thought to have pressed pause because of the spread of coronavirus. An insider said: "It was all set for Japan with 150 guests. Katy was actually really excited about walking down the aisle pregnant. They were both so elated that all the wedding details were finally coming together, but they are hitting pause because of coronavirus." Meanwhile, the 'Roar' singer recently joked about the social distancing rules that have been put in place because of the virus, as it means she has to stay at least six feet away from Lionel and Luke. Katy posted a video of herself having fun with the other judges, and wrote on her Twitter account: "This was before the 6 foot social distance rule...sometimes I wish that always applied between @lukebryanonline @lionelrichie and I [laughing emoji] #AmericanIdol (sic)".



Ryan Seacrest, Katy Perry, Lionel Richie and Luke Bryan

Mel C's daughter made her 'braver'

Mel c and daughter Scarlet Starr

The former Spice Girl - who has 11-year-old daughter Scarlet Starr with her ex-husband Thomas Starr - says it was Scarlet who helped her realise she could walk away from her now-ex. She said: "Before having kids, even though I had friends and a partner, I used to sometimes feel very lonely ... She's made me braver. Leaving her dad was hard, but I wasn't happy and he wasn't happy and it wasn't the environment I wanted my child to grow up in. I couldn't have done that without the strength I got from her." And the 46-year-old singer "feels bad" for her daughter sometimes because she is the "child of a famous person". She added: "I feel bad for Scarlet because it's hard being the child of a famous person. I sometimes say, 'I'm really sorry that you are my daughter,' but she just says, 'Don't worry, you are the best mum.' We're already seeing some pre-teen behavior: she's definitely her own person and she's both embarrassed by me and proud of me." And Mel admits parenting can be "one of the most exhausting and unrewarding jobs" at times. Speaking to The Times newspaper's Weekend supplement, she said: "It can be one of the most exhausting, unrewarding jobs you can do ... I'm about to fly to Australia and I've made a timetable for everyone who'll be looking after Scarlet when I'm gone - my mum, her nanny. There are after-school clubs, playdates; everything's highlighted. As a mum you have to be prepared and that's my responsibility."

WILLIAMS WILL BE SPENDING THE NEXT SIX WEEKS IN SOLITUDE

Serena Williams will be spending "the next six weeks in solitude" amid the coronavirus. The tennis star has urged everyone to stay safe as she revealed herself, her husband Alexis Ohanian and their two-year-old daughter Alexis Olympia, will be remaining on their own for over a month after the global health crisis. Revealing she'd be spending "the next six weeks in solitude", she wrote on social media: "Being a wife. Being a mom. Cooking. Cleaning. Spring cleaning. Face mask. Makeup tutorials. I'll let you know how it goes ... stay safe everyone." Whilst in his own post, Alexis - who is the co-founded of Reddit - revealed he would be having "a lot of extra family time" in the coming weeks. He shared: "We're all going to have a lot of extra family time at-home in these coming weeks. It's going to be hard, but we'll persevere - and as a country, I hope this unites us against a common enemy that doesn't discriminate based on our voting habits. It's not a time to panic, but it is a time to be prudent and responsible - especially because the most vulnerable among us are very much at risk." Meanwhile, Serena previously admitted she finds it hard being a working mom, and it has left her feeling "exhausted and stressed". She wrote: "I am not sure who took this picture but working and being a mom is not easy. —BangShowbiz



Lifestyle | Features



A guard post and bunker are seen at Fortitude Ranch in Mathias, West Virginia. —AFP photos



A bunker is seen at Fortitude Ranch in Mathias.

New breed of US survivalists prepped for collapse

The narrow, worn track in West Virginia, close to the foothills of the Appalachians, leads to a camp set back in the woods, where a group of US survivalists began preparing for the collapse of civilization long before the arrival of the new coronavirus that has brought so much of the world to a halt. Boxes full of family-size tins of food, bags of freeze-dried victuals that can last up to 25 years, rice, flour... the survivalists did not wait for the wave of panic-buying that has emptied shelves across the country: their provisions were already neatly stacked up in a bunker made of reinforced concrete and dug a meter (yard) into the ground.

Ever-ready, they even have ample supplies of two of the most sought-after commodities in the jittery country: toilet paper and face masks. "It's worth a lot of money now!" joked Steve Rene, presenting the 100-acre (40 hectares) site that he manages as though it were a holiday camp. Which it kind of is. The Fortitude Ranch's motto embraces both End Times and more normal times: "Prepare for the Worst... Enjoy the Present!" Members have up to two weeks each year to revel in this rural retreat, enjoying nature, hiking or trout fishing in the appropriately named Lost River. Friendly and clear-headed, Rene, the manager of the West Virginia site — there is another branch in Colorado — tries from the outset to sweep away the clichés surrounding survivalists, also known as "preppers" for their constant Doomsday preparations. "It's not a bunch of crazy people with this idea that tomorrow the world ends," he said.

Collapse, uprising
"We're not militaristic. We have no ties with militias, anything like that," he insisted, although his past military service — he served in Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf in 1991 — is evident from the impeccably ironed brown shirt he wears. Nevertheless, there are lookout posts in all four corners of the property, and there is a high-caliber rifle, capable of stopping an armored vehicle, in the ranch's living room to convince would-be new recruits of just how seriously the members take this enterprise. "Desperate people do desperate things,"



A guard post is seen at the Fortitude Ranch in Mathias, West Virginia.

said the manager, standing among the bare early spring trees. More than foreign invaders, the survivalists view their main threat as fellow Americans rushing out to steal their provisions if public order collapses as a result of a nuclear or biological weapons strike, an economic implosion, a political uprising, a pandemic or a mix of any of the above. "Obviously that's not very likely, but the possibility exists," said Rene. "If you're not prepared in some way, you have just nowhere to go, nothing to do. Everybody scrambles and lots of things get out of hand."

A committee of five people, including Rene, would decide in an emergency whether to declare a "catastrophe scenario," in which case all the members would be invited to retire to the barricaded camp, after which entry would only be permitted upon production of a secret password. In the case of an epidemic, the temperature of each new arrival would be monitored with a no-contact thermometer before they can enter to enjoy free access to a self-sustaining ecosystem that includes wells, solar panels, radio equipment, greenhouses, locally sourced chickens, goats and cows and a ditch where possible contaminated bodies can be incinerated.

'Life insurance'
The creator of the Fortitude Ranch fran-

chise, Drew Miller, is a former military intelligence expert and Harvard graduate who hopes to establish a dozen such retreats across the United States. As opposed to the "luxury bunkers" that the super-rich are building themselves, the entrepreneur is aiming clearly at the middle-class market. People pay at least \$1,000 per year, per person, for the basic package: a berth in a bunker dormitory. "It's like a life insurance policy that actually protects your life, rather than a life insurance policy that pays to bury you," said Rene, who noted his site has the capacity to house up to 500 people in different buildings spread across the property, which is about a two-hour drive from the nation's capital Washington.

Rene has been getting more and more inquiries and emails as the coronavirus spreads across the country. Worried people who already had the idea of survivalism "at the back of their mind" are now seeing "there can be a need," the former soldier told AFP. A laptop open next to him shows an online map displaying the spread of the virus in real time. There are no red dots in the vicinity of the survivalists' ranch: as of Monday, West Virginia was the last state in the country not to have declared any cases of the disease that has shut down so much of the world. —AFP



Goats are seen at Fortitude Ranch.



A smokehouse, solar panels, a greenhouse and the main building are seen at Fortitude Ranch in Mathias.



Fortitude Ranch Chief Operating Officer Steve Rene speaks to AFP inside a storage room stacked with food in Mathias.



Solar panels are seen at the Fortitude Ranch in Mathias.



Fortitude Ranch Chief Operating Officer stands by a 50-caliber gun in Mathias.



Guns are seen inside a lodging at the Fortitude Ranch in Mathias.

McDonald's to scrap plastic in UK 'Happy Meal' toys

McDonald's pledged yesterday to end the use of plastic found in toys served with children's "Happy Meals" in the UK and Ireland by the beginning of 2021. The plastic will be replaced with a "soft toy, sustainable paper-based gifts or books" said the US fast-food giant. "This represents the biggest reduction in plastic by McDonald's UK and Ireland to date and is the next step in its mission to reduce its environmental impact across all areas of the business," said a McDonald's statement. "The move will eliminate over 3,000 metric tons of non-sustainable plastic.

The restaurant added that the move, which

is so far limited to the UK and Ireland only, will represent the company's "biggest reduction in plastic". According to the company's own figures, McDonald's serves about four million customers in the UK and Ireland every day in more than 1,350 restaurants. "Families have high expectations of us and we're working as hard as we can to give them the confidence that their Happy Meal is as sustainable as possible," said Gareth Helm, the senior vice president in the UK and Ireland. Previously, McDonald's has already committed to reduce its CO2 emissions by 36 percent by the end of the decade and to use recycled or renewable materials for all its packaging by 2025. —AFP

Work on Notre-Dame in Paris halted by coronavirus

French authorities halted restoration work on the fire-ravaged Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris on Monday as the country braces for additional measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Workers at the historic landmark in the centre of the French capital had been dismantling the molten metal scaffolding around the church's spire, which collapsed in the catastrophic blaze last April. Officials told AFP that decontamination measures set in place to deal with danger from the huge quantities of lead that melted in the fire were incompatible with rules set down to deal with the coronavirus. France has closed down all schools, theatres, cinemas and a range of shops, with only those selling food and other essential items allowed

to remain open. Paris officials on Monday also announced the closure of all public parks and gardens in a bid to prevent people from gathering despite calls for strict "social distancing" by the authorities.

The capital's public transport operator RATP said metro and suburban rail service will be sharply reduced starting Tuesday, after the government urged companies to allow employees to work from home. "We're seeing on average a 50 percent drop in the number of passengers today across the network" compared with a typical week, the RATP said.

President Emmanuel Macron is due to address the nation on Monday evening, with many expecting him to unveil more strict home confinement rules in a bid to prevent the virus from spreading. Macron is also expected to announce whether the second round of French municipal elections will go ahead this weekend, after the first round of voting on Sunday saw a plunge in voter turnout amid the strict anti-contagion measures. France reported Sunday that the number of coronavirus deaths had jumped to 127 from more than 5,400 cases of infection, with several hundred people hospitalized with serious cases. —AFP

Iraq names new PM as rockets hit base hosting foreign troops

US-led coalition troops begin leaving Iraq bases



BAGHDAD: Iraqi President Barham Saleh (left) meets Prime Minister-designate Adnan Al-Zurfi yesterday. — AFP

BAGHDAD: Iraq's president yesterday named pro-Western lawmaker Adnan Zurfi, a former Najaf city governor, as the next prime minister, tasked with ruling a country hit by military unrest, street protests and the coronavirus outbreak. The nomination came hours after two rockets hit an Iraqi military base hosting US-led coalition and NATO troops, the third such attack within a week, without causing casualties according to military officials.

Lawmaker Zurfi, 54, is the former governor of the Shiite holy city of Najaf and once belonged to the Dawaa party, an opposition force to ex-dictator Saddam Hussein who was ousted in the 2003 US-led invasion. Zurfi is an Iraqi-US dual national who would have to renounce his American citizenship to take up the premiership, which is yet to be confirmed by parliament.

President Barham Saleh said he had nominated Zurfi to replace outgoing premier Adel Abdel Mahdi, who resigned in December amid Iraq's unprecedented wave of anti-government rallies. Zurfi, a member of the Nasr coalition led by ex-PM Haider al-Abadi, now has 30 days to pull together a government.

While he is likely to have the backing of some Shiite parties and the Kurdish and Sunni factions, he was quickly rejected by the powerful Fatah bloc, parliament's second-largest. "We reject the president's unconstitutional step," said a statement by Fatah, the political arm of the Hashed Al-Shaabi military network that includes factions allied with

Washington's arch-foe Tehran. Zurfi's nomination comes at an especially tumultuous time for Iraq, which has been battered by almost six months of street protests, collapsing oil prices, the novel coronavirus outbreak and the renewed rocket attacks, which Washington blames on pro-Iranian forces. A senior Iraqi government source told AFP that political factions had intensely debated names for days, seeking a "non-confrontational" figure.

An earlier nominee, Mohammad Allawi, had failed to form a cabinet by March 2, triggering a new 15-day deadline for Saleh that was set to end late yesterday. The president's announcement came just hours after the two rockets hit the Besmaya base about 60 km south of Baghdad, according to the Iraqi military, the US-led coalition and NATO, all of which have forces stationed there.

US-led coalition sources said later they would redeploy hundreds of troops from bases in Iraq, sending some of them outside the country, but denied the move was a response to the recent spike in rocket attacks. "The coalition is re-positioning troops from a few smaller bases," said coalition spokesman Myles Caggins. The first redeployment was taking place yesterday from Qaim, the western base along the border with Syria, a coalition official told AFP.

"A transfer ceremony is taking place today to hand over the facilities to Iraqi forces, and the intent is that all coalition troops will be leaving Qaim," the official said. — AFP

Saudi shuts mosques...

Continued from Page 1

East Azerbaijan with 78. "As of this morning, more than 15 million of our countrymen have been screened" for symptoms, he said.

The official reiterated calls for Iranians to stay at home during the outbreak and asked them to report possible symptoms on a ministry website. The website identifies the individual using their national identity number and asks if they have symptoms such as coughing or fever. It also asks if anyone suspected of having the virus, under treatment or recently recovered lives with them. If the symptoms are not serious, it advises them to stay at home and tells them where the nearest health-care center is located.

Jordan has announced a lockdown beginning today, ordering all citizens to stay in their homes apart from emergencies and banning travel between provinces, to fight the coronavirus outbreak. Troops were deployed at the entrances of cities yesterday to help impose the measures when they take effect the following day, the army said.

The kingdom, which has already shuttered shops and closed its borders to halt the spread of coronavirus, is expected to issue a royal decree declaring a state of emergency that will give the authorities widespread power to control movement. Jordan has closed land and sea border crossings with Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Israel, and suspended all incoming and outgoing flights. Only cargo flights and commercial overland shipments will be allowed in and out of the country.

Prime Minister Omar Razzaz visited a grain silo and said there were enough strategic stocks to feed the country for months, in an attempt to assure panicky Jordanians who have been hoarding food. Energy officials said gasoline stocks would cover 60 days' supply in a country that imports all its fuel. The cabinet announced the closure of all government agencies except hospitals from today and

ordered private firms to also close their offices and send employees home.

All shops in malls would be shut apart from those selling food and medicine. Gatherings of more than 10 people will be banned. The public security department said it would use force if necessary against anyone resisting these government decisions. Jordan's government suspended trading in the Amman Stock Exchange (ASE) from yesterday until further notice, after the market plunged in recent days to levels not seen in more than 17 years.

Egypt has placed over 300 families under quarantine in a Delta village to stem the spread of the new coronavirus after two deaths were recorded this month originating from the area. "We have confined more than 300 families to their homes where they will remain in quarantine," Health Minister Hala Zayed told late-night television host Amr Adib on Monday.

Without naming the village in Daqahliya governorate, 150 km north of Cairo in the fertile Delta, she explained that "cleansing procedures" were undertaken to prevent further infections and that other "touristic" governorates would also be shut down in coming days. The "heightened" measures come after Egypt recorded two new deaths, with the toll now rising to four.

The health ministry said Monday that an Egyptian man aged 50 died after coming into contact with a 72-year-old woman, who succumbed on March 12 from COVID-19, hailing from the same Daqahliya village now under quarantine. The other death was of a German man, 72, in Luxor, the site of coronavirus cases originating on a Nile cruise boat that was later quarantined.

Egypt's total confirmed virus cases stands at 166 after the ministry reported 40 new cases, 35 of them Egyptians and five foreigners of various nationalities. The country said it would suspend all flights starting tomorrow until the end of the month to try to reduce the rate of infections from the global outbreak. Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly urged Egyptians on Monday to "stay put" in their homes and avoid "panic shopping", saying the state had ample reserves of food items and other basic products. — Agencies

could cost the global economy at least \$1 trillion this year - and perhaps far more. No country can do it alone. More than ever, governments must cooperate to revitalize economies, expand public investment, boost trade, and ensure targeted support for the people and communities most affected by the disease or more vulnerable to the negative economic impacts - including women who often shoulder a disproportionate burden of care work.

A pandemic drives home the essential interconnectivity of our human family. Preventing the further spread of COVID-19 is a shared responsibility for us all. The United Nations - including the World Health Organization - is fully mobilized. As part of our human family, we are working 24/7 with governments, providing international guidance, helping the world take on this threat.

We are in this together - and we will get through this, together.

adding that there is a proposal to offer them free air tickets. Ghanem said MPs called on the government during the meeting to defer loan repayments for six months and expressed hope the response will be positive. The meeting also discussed repatriating thousands of Kuwaitis from abroad, which has been delayed until the government can prepare enough quarantine sites to keep them.

The health ministry meanwhile announced seven new cases, raising the total number to 130, of whom 12 have recovered and were discharged. Of the 118 cases under observation, four remain in the intensive care unit. Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said all the seven new cases are of Kuwaiti citizens returning from the UK.

Sanad warned the slightest sign of easing up in the fight against COVID-19 will spell danger and catastrophe for the Kuwaiti society. He affirmed individuals and institutions have a shared responsibility in protecting the society from the menace of coronavirus, indicating that so far, measures carried out in Kuwait call for optimism and hope. Sanad pointed out that all members of the health force are following proper protocols in addressing any situation connected with COVID-19, indicating that efforts have been successful in managing the crisis.

The ministry of health said in a new statement yesterday said that people coming from 12 countries - Britain, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, Italy, South Korea, Spain and the United States will be quarantined. It called on people coming from all other countries to stay at home for 14 days and not to go to work. It advised them also to contact the ministry on the hotline 151.

Psychology behind toilet...

Continued from Page 1

associated in the minds of people as a symbol of safety," Steven Taylor, author of "The Psychology of Pandemics" told AFP. "People feel the need to do something to keep themselves and their family safe, because what else can they do apart from wash their hands and self-isolate?" added the psychiatry professor at the University of British Columbia.

Another theory Taylor put forward is rooted in our evolutionary aversion to things which disgust us, heightened when people feel threatened with infection. "And so I think this is one reason they latched on to the toilet paper, because it's a means of avoiding disgust." Economists have also suggested people may be trying to eliminate one risk that is relatively easy and superficial, rather than doing something more costly that may reduce their risk a greater amount. This is known as "Zero risk bias".

"My guess is we want to feel in control and have limited budgets," said Farasat Bokhari, a health economist at the University of East Anglia in Great Britain. "So we go buy something that is cheap to buy, that we can store, and we know at the back of our minds that we are going to use anyway," he said. A more expensive but necessary item to stock might be non-perishable food - but if frozen meals,

canned foods and ramen aren't exactly your favorites, you could be stuck with a big bill for items you eventually throw away, should the worst fail to materialize.

According to Taylor, many of the behaviors we see now also occurred in previous pandemics, including the Spanish flu in 1918, which killed almost 700,000 Americans and sent panicked citizens to stores and pharmacies to hoard goods. Some at the time even floated the conspiracy theory the virus may have been a bioweapon devised by Germany. The new coronavirus has been called a Chinese weapon and an American bioweapon, depending on who is making the accusation.

One key difference between the current pandemic and those before it is the ubiquity of social media - the swine flu pandemic of 2009 happened when the medium was still relatively new - and Taylor sees both pluses and negatives. "That's enabled the reverberations of dramatic images and videos throughout the world, inflating people's sense of threat and urgency," said Taylor. On the other hand, "Social media can be great for social support, particularly if you're in self isolation."

So are we destined for a breakdown in social cohesion if the pandemic stretches out? History says no, said Taylor. "Rioting and bad behavior in previous pandemics has been relatively uncommon - it has happened, there have been outbreaks, but the main response has been one of order, of people coming together, of solidarity, helping each other out and doing their best as a community to deal with this." — AFP

COVID-19: We will come through...

Continued from Page 1

needed personnel; and by developing life-saving medical interventions.

All of us have a responsibility, too - to follow medical advice and take simple, practical steps recommended by health authorities. In addition to being a public health crisis, the virus is infecting the global economy. Financial markets have been hard hit by the uncertainty. Global supply chains have been disrupted. Investment and consumer demand have plunged - with a real and rising risk of a global recession.

United Nations economists estimate that the virus

PM says Kuwait ready for any...

Continued from Page 1

Lawmakers yesterday called on Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh for the need to deport between 100,000 and 160,000 expats living illegally in the country by providing them with an amnesty and a free air ticket. Meanwhile, Saleh again warned people to stay away from gatherings, especially weddings and diwanis, or face the possibility of living under curfew, insisting that it remains an option.

The issues came up during a meeting between some 20 MPs and Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem and Saleh to discuss several issues related to the coronavirus measures. MP Abdullah Al-Kandari said there are 160,000 illegal residents in the country and "work is ongoing to provide them with facilities to leave the country".

MP Adel Al-Damkhi said MPs discussed with the interior minister the issue of the demographic structure and demanded that residential areas with "bachelors" should be cordoned off. MP Yusef Al-Fadhalah said lawmakers called on the minister to deport illegal expats and a meeting will be held with the minister of social affairs today or tomorrow over the issue.

MP Saadoun Hammad said the government gave provisional approval to defer repaying of loans for six months, adding that MPs demanded ending the school year now and deporting illegal expats,

Immune response mapped; masks...

Continued from Page 1

Kedzierska said her team's research was "an important step in understanding recovery from COVID-19. "We have verifiable results in more patients with moderate disease. Now we can ask the question: what is different or missing in people who are fatally ill?" She said the findings had two practical applications. First, it will help virologists develop a vaccine because the goal in vaccination is to replicate the body's natural immune response to viruses.

The team identified four distinct immune-cell populations in the COVID-19 patient's blood as she underwent recovery. Kedzierska said these were "very similar to what we see in patients with influenza". Although it kills hundreds of thousands of people annually, a broadly effective vaccine exists against influenza.

The second practical application is screening, said Kedzierska. Their observations could also help health authorities make better predictions in future disease outbreaks about who is most at risk. These immune system "markers" could in theory predict with greater accuracy which patients are likely to have mild symptoms and which are at risk of dying. The majority of COVID-19 deaths occur in patients who are elderly or have existing medical conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes.

Children, on the other hand, appear to show few or no symptoms. Kedzierska said more research was needed to work out why, but the immune system does naturally slow down as people age. Sharon Lewin, director of the Doherty Institute and one of the world's leading infectious diseases experts, told AFP that the study results were promising. "It shows that the body makes a very good and powerful immune response to virus and it is associated with symptom clearing," she said. "Hopefully now we can fish out those antibodies and grow them up to scale," she said.

Meanwhile, wearing masks and gloves as a precaution against coronavirus is ineffective, unnecessary for the vast majority of people, and may even spread infections faster, experts said yesterday. While near-total lockdowns have been imposed in Italy, Spain and now France, the World Health Organization's advice has remained unchanged since the start of the global outbreak: Wash your hands, don't touch your face, and keep your distance.

The WHO says it is advisable to wear a protective mask in public if you suspect you are infected or someone you are caring for is, in which case the advice is to stay home whenever possible. "There are limits to how a mask can protect you from being infected and we've said the most important thing everyone can do is wash your hands, keep your hands away from your face, observe very precise hygiene," said WHO's emergencies director Mike Ryan.

The advice is all the more urgent given the WHO's estimate that health workers worldwide will need at least 89 million masks every month to treat COVID-19 cases. There are already shortages of masks for medical professionals around the world, a problem that could get worse as the pandemic drags on. But the message about masks hasn't reached everyone. "I'm surprised to see through the window in my ministry lots of people in the street wearing masks when that doesn't correspond to our recommendations," French health minister Olivier Veran said Monday.

Mariam, 35, told AFP that she was wearing a mask because she has an elderly mother. "Just in case," said Mariam, who was also sporting latex gloves. Mariam, who didn't want to give her last name, said she got her mask from "a friend's mother who works in a hospital".

As well as hoovering up stocks sorely needed by medical professionals, experts say masks can give people who wear them a false sense of security. For example, many people who wear them don't follow the official advice of washing their hands thoroughly first, ensuring it's air tight and not to touch it once it's on. "People are always readjusting their masks and that has the potential to contaminate them," said France's head of health, Jerome Salomon. "If someone has come across the virus, it's surely going to be on the mask."

Gloves, similarly, don't greatly heighten protection and could even end up making you sick. "If people cannot stop touching their face, gloves will not serve a purpose," Amesh Adalja, from Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, told AFP. One 2015 study in the American Journal of Infection Control found that people touch their face on average 20 times an hour. The novel coronavirus is transmitted via skin contact, transferring infected globules of mucus via the ears, eyes or nose.

"Gloves are not a substitute for washing your hands," said Adalja, adding that surgical gloves should only be used in a medical setting. Plus, said Veran: "If you're wearing gloves you're not washing your hands." For one Paris resident, Oriane, 32, this is not a problem. "I wash my gloves," she said, gesturing to her bright blue surgical mitts. — AFP

Classifieds

Wednesday, March 18, 2020

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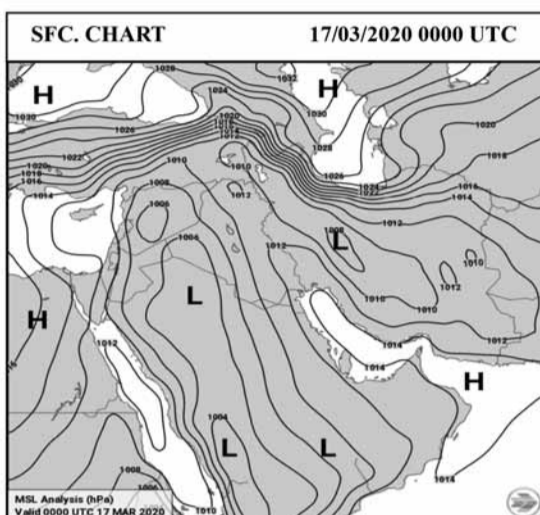
Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Warm with light variable wind changing to light to moderate south easterly wind, with speed of 08 - 35 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

BY NIGHT: Fair and Partly cloudy with moderate to fresh south easterly wind, with speed of 20 - 45 km/h with a chance for scattered rain.

WEATHER WARNING	No Current Warnings
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STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	26 °C	18 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	29 °C	15 °C
ABDALY	30 °C	15 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	29 °C	16 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	27 °C	17 °C
SALMIYAH	23 °C	19 °C
AHMADI	23 °C	19 °C
NUWAISIB	26 °C	15 °C
WAFRA	30 °C	15 °C
SALMY	26 °C	14 °C



4 DAYS FORECAST						
DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Wednesday	03/18	Unstable and Cloudy to partly cloudy with rising dust and a chance for rain that might be thundery	28 °C	17 °C	SE	25 - 55 km/h
Thursday	03/19	Warm and Partly cloudy	28 °C	15 °C	N-NE	10 - 35 km/h
Friday	03/20	Warm and Partly cloudy to cloudy with a chance for scattered rain later on	29 °C	16 °C	NE-SE	08 - 32 km/h
Saturday	03/21	Warm and Partly cloudy with a chance for scattered rain	27 °C	16 °C	SE-VRB	08 - 30 km/h

PRAYER TIMES	
Fajr	04:37
Sunrise	05:56
Zuhr	11:57
Asr	15:22
Sunset	17:57
Isha	19:14

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT	
MAX. Temp.	29 °C
MIN. Temp.	14 °C
MAX. RH	85 %
MIN. RH	29 %
MAX. Wind	SW 32 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

Hospitals

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Imran Can, holder of Indian Passport No. J3966727 r/o H. No. 163/1, Demani, Cuncolim, Salcete - Goa presently residing in Kuwait hereby declare that I have changed my name from Imran Khan to Imran Can. Hereafter in all my dealings and documents I will be known by the name Imran Can. (C 5496) **18-3-2020**

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. 54699802 resident at Salmiya block 12, building No: 33, need to split my name, Surname - Jeevan, Given name - Juan. (C 5707)

Juan Jeevan holder of Indian Passport No: 54699802 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: 54699793 resident at Salmiya, Block 12, Building No: 33 need to split my name, Surname - Jeevan, Given name - Juana

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Daily SuDoku

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

medium

Yesterday's Solution

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

very hard

STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)
 Let your emotions play with your imagination today, and feel free to discuss your findings openly with others, Aries. Don't get caught up in so rational a frame of mind that you refuse to acknowledge any other way of viewing a current situation. Put away your analytical side in order to disclose a more abstract, intuitive perspective. Exercise that part of your brain that doesn't normally get used.

Libra (September 23-October 22)
 Feel free to enlist your own creativity today to solve any problem that may come your way, Libra. Don't feel like you absolutely need to take a rational and methodical approach. This sort of frame of mind has already been tried. Now it's time to explore a more intuitive way to complete any task that you wish to tackle now. Exercise more of your sensitive nature.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)
 Trust that you have all the facts you need today, Taurus. You should be feeling quite good, emotionally. Use this self-confidence to make great strides in whatever you want to accomplish. Have fun letting your mind drift to a fanciful world where it can explore your imaginative proclivities. Feel free to use your strong hold on facts as a base to take off into a highly creative and intuitive realm.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)
 The energy of the day is electric, and you could find yourself bouncing from task to task and person to person, Scorpio. Things are apt to happen when you least expect them, so be prepared for surprises. There's an element of genius to the day that might inspire you to be someone much greater than you ever thought you could be. Join with people who share your same zest for life.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)
 You may find yourself emotionally challenged today by a strong force demanding your attention, Gemini. Your hyperawareness to every situation might be driving you a bit crazy. Perhaps you just need to tone things down and relax. Enjoy rather than question the fun-loving energy of the day. The more you simply let loose and explore, the better off you'll be.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)
 You might feel as if your heart is playing tricks on you today, Sagittarius. Perhaps you're coming up against a strong force that's causing you to doubt yourself in some way. Don't be conned by loud, obnoxious talk. Seek the true meaning behind the words. You'll find that most of your strength is internal. Be prepared for stubborn wills to make a powerful presence in your world today.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)
 You have the opportunity to do some intense self-healing today, Cancer, so you communicate more directly with your core self without the distractions of other people. Do what you can to hone in on the internal issues that require your attention. It's key that you learn how to address these issues yourself instead of relying on other people to take care of these needs for you today.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)
 There is a great deal of unexpected communication coming your way today, Capricorn, but be careful about the people you trust. There's an element of fantasy factored into the picture. This might cause some disruption if you automatically accept everything at face value. Make sure you check your sources at least twice before proceeding. You'll be much better off if you prepare for the worst.

Leo (July 23-August 22)
 You might be a bit confused with the mood of the day, Leo, which fosters quick action and a sporadic approach to things. More than likely, this approach isn't exactly in line with your usual methodical protocol. Do what you can to merge with this energy in order to add a more spontaneous spark to your daily routine. Take a walk on the wild side today.

Aquarius (January 20-February 18)
 You may find that people aren't necessarily very sympathetic to your feelings today, Aquarius. It's quite possible that they're more responsive to facts and information than emotions. It could be that you need to enlist some sort of translator in order to get through to a person with whom you're trying to communicate. Don't hesitate to ask for more clarification on something if you need it.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)
 Feel free to match your plaid pants with your paisley shirt today, Virgo. Accessorize with wild sneakers and a striped jacket. Let the oddball within you shine brightly! This is a terrific day for you, and you should feel free to express yourself openly and loudly to the world. You should experience a great deal of self-confidence. Take full advantage of it at this time.

Pisces (February 19-March 20)
 You may feel as if people have turned against you today and that they've suddenly lost interest in what you have to say, Pisces. Maybe this is a reflection of your own inability to truly listen to someone else talking. Look at the collective picture and open your eyes to the world around you. Get involved in the community instead of only focusing on you all the time.

THE ROAD HOME MAZE

FIND YOUR WAY HOME!

Sports

Inside China's tough swimming regime that shaped Sun Yang

China's approach has helped make the country a powerhouse in sport

SHANGHAI: A former team-mate of banned Olympic champion Sun Yang has given AFP a rare insight into how China drives its swimmers hard from childhood in the pursuit of national glory. But Wang Yajie, who started swimming at three-and-a-half, told AFP that China's approach had helped make the country a powerhouse in the sport.

Chinese swimming is in the spotlight after Sun, a three-time Olympic gold-medallist, was banned last month for eight years for refusing to provide a sample to doping inspectors.

Sun, the most decorated product of the Chinese system, started swimming at a young age at Chen Jinglun Sports School in Hangzhou, which has bred a number of Olympic stars. Wang was Sun's contemporary in the national swimming team before she retired following China's 2013 National Games to pursue other interests, among them singing. Underlining the sensitivity in China surrounding Sun, Wang declined to speak about his doping case, saying only that he was "a rare talent" whose loss would affect the team's medal hopes at this year's Tokyo Games.

The 27-year-old also declined to discuss whether during her spell in the Chinese team — a world often closed to outsiders — she was offered any banned substances. But Wang, a former national butterfly champion, gave a glimpse of life at the heart of Chinese swimming, which is regarded as the jewel in the crown of Olympic sports in the country.

While on the national team they were mostly confined to camp, rising at 5:30 am to train for up to eight hours a day, seven days a week in the most intense

periods. "We'd go to sleep at 10:00 pm with two or three people sharing a room, usually two," said Wang, speaking by telephone from Wuhan, the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak and a city of 11 million people on lockdown.

"I used to write a training diary every day. Because you need to focus on rest after training, you generally don't leave the training base." They were well looked after but training was "tiring and hard", Wang said.

She admitted that the perception that Chinese training tends to be repetitive and unforgiving is accurate.

But Wang said sacrifices must be made in the pursuit of success, and that it is the same with top-level athletes in all countries. "Recalling it now, I'd use three words to describe my feelings: affection, passion and

gratitude. "Every swimmer trained with 100 percent passion during each session, and I was no exception," said Wang, who now runs a swimming club for children in Wuhan.

SUN 'VERY AMIABLE'

Sun, the 1500m freestyle world record-holder, has vowed to appeal the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) ruling against him. The length of the ban took into account the fact that it was his second doping violation, after he was suspended for three months in 2014 for taking a banned substance.

If the CAS judgement is upheld at a Swiss federal court, China will be shorn of its biggest star at the Tokyo Olympics — and 28-year-old Sun's career will almost certainly be over.

Wang described Sun as "very amiable" on the few



SHENYANG: File photo taken on September 4, 2013 shows Olympic gold medallist Sun Yang of Zhejiang Province reacting after winning gold in the Men's 400m Freestyle event during the 12th National China Games in Shenyang, Liaoning Province. — AFP

occasions they talked and believes that the Chinese team can still do well in Tokyo, despite his expected absence. "The Chinese swimming team still has a lot of new stars, they are very strong," she said.

Wang said there were clear differences between how young swimmers are coached in China and other nations. "Whether in sports training or learning in general, they mainly enjoy the process and enjoy the

sport," she said of some other countries.

"They are not so strict about technique and results and they may be more respectful of children's ideas. "In China, starting at six or seven years old, children begin to develop swimming skills, swimming speed, strength training and other disciplines. "I think that is why the performance of the Chinese swimming team is getting better and better." —AFP

No deadline for Olympic decision

SYDNEY: The International Olympic Committee's point man for the Tokyo Games has insisted there's no deadline to call off the event and that it was still going ahead as planned. John Coates, chairman of the Tokyo coordination commission, was speaking before his return from Switzerland to Australia, where he is facing a mandatory two-week quarantine.

The Lausanne-based IOC is set for emergency talks yesterday as doubts grow over whether it remains feasible to hold the Games during the coronavirus emergency, with world sport largely grinding to a halt.

Senior IOC member Dick Pound suggested last month that a final call would be made by late May. But Coates, who is also president of the Australian Olympic committee, disputed the timeline. "The IOC didn't recognise any dates that Dick came up with and I think Dick backed off that as well," he told Tuesday's Sydney Morning Herald. "It's all proceeding to start

on the 24th of July.

"It's never been the IOC's position. It was Dick's idea," he added of the apparent deadline. "There is four months to go." Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and International Olympic Committee chief Thomas Bach have repeatedly insisted preparations should continue as scheduled even as the virus scare intensifies. The IOC's executive board is due to meet via conference call to prepare an "information exchange" ahead of a series of talks with athletes' representatives, National Olympic Committees and International Federations.

The issue of qualifying is expected to be a particular focus of the telephone meeting, after a long list of events were called off. "The difficulty for those who have qualified or will qualify is they won't get any more international competition," admitted Coates, who said it will also be difficult to get athletes into Japan without further spreading coronavirus.



John Coates

"Japan has got some restrictions on athletes but I know that the Chinese are probably the best organised," he said. "The Chinese are in various parts of Europe and the last I heard is they're bringing them all together in a university in Paris where they'll be fully contained, 600 of them.

"They will go straight from confinement there, straight into Japan. They won't put anyone on a plane who has got coronavirus." Coates will go into a

two weeks' isolation on his return home after Australia imposed strict travel rules to counter the spread of the virus. He welcomed the tough measures being taken by Australia and other countries to tackle the growing crisis, but criticised Europe's response. "Despite a bit of personal inconvenience, I'm very happy that countries are taking these steps that clearly some of the European countries should have taken earlier," he said. —AFP

RA under pressure but game will survive coronavirus

MELBOURNE: Rugby Australia (RA) faces "extreme" pressure on its finances due to the coronavirus pandemic but the game is strong enough to survive the crisis, chief executive Raelene Castle said yesterday.

The coronavirus outbreak has shut down sport around the world, with top competitions called off as governments ban mass gatherings and tighten border controls as part of efforts to contain the virus which has killed more than 7,000 people.

The suspension of Super Rugby over the weekend, seven rounds into the season, is a major blow for RA and partner unions in the southern hemisphere, which rely on broadcast revenues to prop

up their domestic games.

Castle said a prolonged shutdown would be a major challenge for RA and that the governing body had already opened communication with the Australian government to flag concerns.

"The impact of government decisions to contain the coronavirus has seen rugby in Australia impacted in ways that we could never have imagined," Castle told reporters in Sydney yesterday. "We support these decisions as the health and wellbeing of Australians must come first.

"However, any ongoing restrictions will put extreme pressure on Rugby Australia's finances. "We are obviously not the only sport in the country facing these challenges in the current environment," the National Rugby League, Australia's top flight rugby league competition, has already requested assistance from the Australian government after warning of a "catastrophic" hit to its finances.

Rival winter football code the Australian Football League has also voiced concerns about the financial impact in the leadup to the indigenous game's season-opener this week, with fans banned from

stadiums indefinitely.

Castle said RA was working with partner unions in New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina to work out how the Super Rugby season could be salvaged, perhaps with a schedule limiting international travel.

Australia's four teams compete in a conference with Japan's Sunwolves, while the five New Zealand sides have their own conference. The sole South Africa team, the Jaguares, belong to the five-team South Africa conference.

"The travel restrictions mean that cross-border competition doesn't seem realistic so domestic obviously leads the conversation," Castle said. "That's all the work we're doing and we expect we'd be able to communicate on that in the coming days."

Castle said RA had also suspended negotiations with broadcasters for the next five-year rights deal starting in 2021 for Super Rugby and the Wallabies' international matches. The decision was made after feedback from broadcasters who wanted to focus on "important issues" with their own businesses, she added. — Reuters

same, while South Africa have four and Argentina one, which would potentially mean the Jaguares having to base themselves in South Africa.

"The travel restrictions mean that cross-border competition doesn't seem realistic so domestic obviously leads the conversation," Castle said. "That's all the work we're doing and we expect we'd be able to communicate on that in the coming days."

South Africa's Coastal Sharks currently top the overall table, one point ahead of the Brumbies. Despite what could be crippling financial costs to rugby clubs worldwide from the global health crisis, Castle insisted the sport would survive.

"Yes, there's going to be some bumps in the road, there's no doubt about that, and we ultimately might have to make some difficult decisions along the way. But the sport's not going anywhere," she said.

Rival code rugby league plans to press ahead in Australia behind closed doors with the NRL season, which began last weekend. — AFP

JOC deputy head says he has coronavirus

TOKYO: Japan Olympic Committee (JOC) deputy chief Kozo Tashima said yesterday he had contracted coronavirus, as doubts increase over whether Tokyo can safely host the Summer Games.

"Today, my test result showed positive for the new coronavirus," Tashima said in a statement, issued via the Japan Football Association, which he also heads.

"I have a mild fever. Examinations showed a symptom of pneumonia, but I'm fine. I will concentrate on treatment following doctors' advice," he said.

Japanese officials insist that the summer Games — due to start in July — will take place as scheduled despite rising speculation that it might be postponed or even cancelled due to the virus.

Tashima said he had been on a business trip since February 28, first heading to Belfast to attend the annual general meeting of the International Football Association Board (IFAB).

From March 2, he visited Amsterdam for a Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) meeting to give a presentation on Japan's bid for the 2023 women's World Cup.

And On March 3, he attended a general meeting of the same body.

"In Amsterdam and in Europe in early March, the level of nervousness against the novel coronavirus was not the same as now," he said in the statement.

"Everyone was still doing hugs, handshakes and bises (cheek kissing)."

He then travelled to the United States to watch the Japanese women's team in action and to lobby for the women's World Cup, before returning home on March 8.

"In the United States, too, the sense of crisis about the novel coronavirus was not as serious as now," he said.

Staff at the Japan FA have been working from home as a precaution against the virus, but Tashima said he went to the association building several times last week and attended meetings.

He began feeling chills and experienced a mild fever from Sunday. He went to a local public health centre on Monday and told them about his travel history.

During the UEFA gatherings, Tashima said he saw Swiss and Serbian football chiefs, who have tested positive for the virus, although he added it was not clear how he contracted the infection. His positive test came out on Tuesday.

"I have chosen to face the illness as so many people are doing in Japan and around the world," he said, adding that he hoped his decision would help eradicate the stigma attached to the infection.

His announcement came as the Tokyo 2020 organising committee said it would scale down festivities related to the Olympic torch relay to prevent further spread of the virus.

The flame, which has already been lit in Greece, will arrive in northern Japan on Friday, with the torch relay slated to start on March 26 from Fukushima. — AFP

Suspended Super Rugby mulls derbies to fill the void

SYDNEY: Super Rugby is exploring domestic derbies as a way of resuming competition after its coronavirus suspension, Rugby Australia chief Raelene Castle said yesterday. The southern hemisphere club championship, which features 15 teams from five countries, was halted last weekend after New Zealand said all inbound travellers must self-isolate for 14 days to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Australia quickly followed suit, leaving Super Rugby's fate in the balance and clubs and national bodies facing the prospect of serious financial prob-

Sports

Euro 2020 fate to be decided as coronavirus threat looms

UEFA to hold video conference with representatives from all 55 member associations

PARIS: UEFA is expected to postpone Euro 2020 by up to a year yesterday, as European football's governing body considers its response to the fallout of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. All of Europe's leading domestic leagues ground to a halt last week with football confronting its biggest issue in modern times, and the fate of UEFA's Champions League and Europa League competitions must also be determined.

UEFA will hold a video conference with representatives from all 55 member associations as well as from clubs and players bodies. It will then hold an executive committee meeting at 1400 (1300 GMT) at its Swiss headquarters.

The future of the European Championship, due to take place for the first time in a dozen different cities spread across the continent from June 12 to July 12, is up in the air. The "dark scenarios" that UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin warned against envisaging when he spoke at the organisation's congress in Amsterdam just two weeks ago now have to be considered. Europe has become the epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic, with Italy and Spain on lockdown, France rapidly following suit, and other countries closing borders to halt the spread of the outbreak. More than 2,100 people have died in Italy, which is supposed to host the opening game of Euro 2020 in Rome.

The head of the Italian football federation, Gabriele Gravina, has already proposed that the Euros be postponed, with Italy coach Roberto Mancini calling for it to be pushed back 12 months.

"We would have won the European Championship this summer, we can also win it in 2021," Mancini told

television station Rai Sport.

It is a position that many across the continent are coming round to amid much uncertainty as to when club football can resume. "UEFA has no choice. They have to postpone the Euros and the Champions League," one senior figure in the world game told AFP, although finding agreement across the board may not be easy.

German league chief Christian Seifert believes postponing the European Championship is inevitable. "I firmly count on the fact the tournament will be postponed," Seifert said. "The probability that we have a perfect Euros this summer is measured by a number close to zero."

German broadcaster ZDF reported that two possible options are on the table. One is to push it back to 2021, although that is not as simple as it might appear, as it would need FIFA president Gianni Infantino to agree to halting the inaugural edition of his highly lucrative Club World Cup, due to take place in June and July next year in China with some of Europe's top club sides involved.

FIFA offered "no comment" on Monday on the matter. There is also the issue of the women's European Championship, scheduled to run from July 7 to August 1 next year in England, with the final at Wembley. The London venue is also supposed to hold the semi-finals and final of Euro 2020. UEFA has also planned to stage an Under-21 Euros in Hungary and Slovenia in June next year.

The alternative option for UEFA, according to ZDF, is to maintain a Euro 2020 by playing it later in the year. That supposes that the crisis will have calmed down by then, and there is also the issue of all the

chief executive Wasim Khan said officials were forced to reconsider their plans after a foreign player showed coronavirus-like symptoms.

"He's an overseas player. He is not in Pakistan right now. He's developed the symptoms in the last 24 hours," said Khan, adding that authorities had decided against releasing the player's name.

International players, including from England, Australia, New Zealand and the West Indies, have been leaving the country en masse in recent days as cases of coronavirus rise. The PCB "has also facilitated the process of carrying out immediate tests of all those who were involved with the (PSL)", Khan added.

"The PCB hopes and prays that normalcy returns quickly to our society so that everyone can return to a healthy and routine lifestyle and we can bring back



SAINT PETERSBURG: File photo shows Skillzy, the official mascot for the Euro 2020 football tournament, is seen during a presentation at the Saint Petersburg Stadium in Saint Petersburg. UEFA has proposed postponing the European Championship, due to take place across the continent in June and July this year, until 2021 at crisis meetings. — AFP

other football that has been suspended. UEFA may come to a decision to try to complete the Champions League and Europa League by curtailing the competitions, meaning ties up to the semi-finals could be decided in one-off matches.

Financially, UEFA would undoubtedly prefer post-

poning their flagship tournaments to cancelling them altogether, or playing matches behind closed doors. "The financial stakes are enormous," according to one senior figure in the international game. "We know that FIFA has significant reserves but we don't know about UEFA or the different leagues." — AFP

Pakistan Super League suspended

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Twenty20 cricket league was suspended yesterday after a foreign player developed suspected coronavirus symptoms before the start of the semi-finals.

The Pakistan Super League (PSL) announced last week that the playoffs would be truncated with this week's semi-finals and final in Lahore to be played with no spectators to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The final had already been brought forward from Sunday to Wednesday, Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB)

FIFA to use 'power of football' to combat coronavirus

PARIS: FIFA president Gianni Infantino on Monday urged authorities to use "the power of football" to reinforce important messages in the fight against coronavirus, promising initiatives with the World Health Organization. "I highly recommend you to also at your level use the power of football to send out and spread these key messages," Infantino wrote in an open letter, seen by AFP, to FIFA's members and stakeholders.

"Most importantly, the football authorities must take all necessary measures to prevent the virus spreading to the wider community," he said.

"In partnership with the WHO, we are launching awareness building initiatives designed to provide practical recommendations and steps to tackle the spread of COVID-19." Infantino also suggested football could play

a crucial role in helping society recover from the pandemic. The coronavirus has infected more than 175,000 people across the world since it was first identified in central China in late December. It has claimed 7,000 deaths, according to an AFP tally. "Sport in general and football, in particular, can — and I believe will — play a big part in helping our world recover once we have, hopefully sooner rather than

later, returned to normality," said Infantino.

UEFA will hold a crisis meeting on Tuesday to determine whether to postpone Euro 2020, which is due to take place for the first time in a dozen different cities spread across the continent from June 12 to July 12. Europe's top leagues have already suspended competition due to the outbreak of the virus. — AFP

In confirming round two would go ahead without fans, Australian Rugby League Commission chairman Peter V'landys warned of dire consequences to the viability of a sport seen as part of Australia's social fabric. "I can't stress enough that our game has never faced such challenges. The longer it takes, the more pressure on our financial viability," he said. "Our money will only last so long, and once it's extinguished, we are in big trouble."

Broadcasters do not have to pay if games aren't played, the NRL said on its website, and V'landys has urged the government to help the sport as part of its nearly \$18 billion coronavirus economic stimulus package. The NRL announced a Aus\$30 million surplus in its most recent financial results, but its reserves won't last long if games are cancelled and salaries still need to be paid. Phil Gould, an influential ex-player, coach, administrator and current television pundit, questioned why the game's financial model had not left it with a bigger war chest.

"We've got to learn from what we've done in the past and ask ourselves why we are so vulnerable as a code right at the moment because we have to close down for a season," he said.

Some players have voiced concerns about games going ahead, saying the cancellation of global events, including the Australian Grand Prix after a McLaren team member tested positive, should be setting off alarm bells.

NRL chief Todd Greenberg said he had listened to all opinions, but "it remains our plan to continue to play games in round two this weekend".

DOOMSDAY SCENARIO

The massively popular AFL faces a similar dooms-

day scenario, with its blockbuster season-opener between Richmond and Carlton at the Melbourne Cricket Ground set to kick off with no one there. Ordinarily, they would expect a bumper crowd.

"A crowd of high 80s, 90,000, would probably return a gate of Aus\$1.2 to Aus\$1.4 million. That's one game. You extrapolate that and it's a big number," said Richmond chief executive Brendon Gale.

The players' union on Tuesday said there was overwhelming support to keep playing, but AFL administrators deferred their decision pending updated health advice. In a bid to keep costs down, the AFL has encouraged clubs to make cutbacks, which will likely mean lay-offs and redundancies. Players have reportedly been asked to take a 20 percent pay cut.

"Football will find a way through," AFL chief Gillon McLachlan insisted. In contrast, Super Rugby, which involves Australian rugby union teams, has suspended all fixtures while Cricket Australia, whose home season was coming to a close, did the same.

Football is not as popular in Australia as rugby league and AFL, but it has a faithful following and also intends to keep the domestic A-League going. "The financial impact on the sport is something at some point we are going to get to," said FFA chief James Johnson. "But our priority right now is to ensure our people are safe." Ten of the 11 A-League teams are Australian, with the exception of New Zealand's Wellington Phoenix. They face being quarantined for a fortnight on arrival in Australia, where they will base themselves for the rest of the season, and then for another 14 days when returning home. Club legend Paul Ihll said Phoenix's decision to shift to Australia was "ridiculous". "They've got to suspend (the season) and see where it's at in a month," he said. — AFP

Wuhan Zall back in China and into quarantine

SHANGHAI: Chinese football club Wuhan Zall, whose home city is ground zero of the coronavirus pandemic, have landed in China after being stranded in Spain since late January — and were immediately placed in two weeks' quarantine.

The Chinese Super League season has been indefinitely postponed because of the virus with Wuhan Zall exemplifying clubs' predicaments, enduring weeks of disruption and uncertainty. The latest instalment of the team's tortuous journey saw the homesick squad touch down in the southern city of Shenzhen on Monday afternoon.

However, due to strict new Chinese rules and health inspections on arriving passengers, imposed to prevent an influx of imported cases from the global contagion, it took more than 12 hours for the players to arrive at their Shenzhen hotel.

They now face isolation for a fortnight, according to the official Xinhua news agency, and still do not know when they will be able to return to their homes and families.

The team cannot go back to Wuhan — which is 1,000 kilometres (600 miles) from Shenzhen — because the city of 11 million remains sealed off. "After an unforgettable and arduous journey, the team arrived in Shenzhen at 3:00 pm on March 16 and returned to the embrace of the motherland," the club said, also referring to the "arduous and long process" of getting through immigration and health checks.

Jose Gonzalez's squad are attempting to stay fit in case the season gets underway, all while worrying about family stuck in Wuhan, where the virus emerged in December. "After the required isolation period in Shenzhen, the Wuhan Zall team will resume training," the club said.

The team was training in Spain when the virus first spread outward from China. But Spain itself has now become a viral hotspot, and the squad left there at the weekend for China, where a massive quarantine effort has reduced infection rates to near-zero.

Media reports said Wuhan Zall were stranded in Frankfurt for a time as they attempted to find a flight back to China. "Although thousands of miles away from their families, the hearts of the players were always concerned about the domestic epidemic," Wuhan Zall said. — AFP



Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Bayern Munich v Chelsea FC	23:00
beIN Sports	
FC Barcelona v SSC Napoli	23:00
beIN Sports	

18 Inside China's tough swimming regime that shaped Sun Yang



19 Euro 2020 fate to be decided as coronavirus threat looms



19 FIFA to use 'power of football' to combat coronavirus



Brady announces departure from Patriots



KANSAS CITY: File photo Tom Brady(L) of the New England Patriots talks with Hall of Famer Joe Montana prior to Super Bowl LIV between the San Francisco 49ers and the Kansas City Chiefs at Hard Rock Stadium on February 2, 2020. Brady announced his departure from the New England Patriots yesterday.—AFP

LOS ANGELES: Tom Brady announced his departure from the New England Patriots yesterday, ending a glittering 20-year run with the franchise which saw him become the most successful quarterback in NFL history.

Brady, 42, confirmed his departure in a series of posts on social media but did not divulge where he will play next season. "Although my football journey will take place elsewhere, I appreciate everything that we have achieved and am grateful for our incredible TEAM accomplishments," Brady said in a statement.

"I don't know what my football future holds but it is time for me to open a new stage for my life and career," he added. Brady is widely regarded as the greatest quarterback in NFL history, winning a record six Super Bowl titles in a career with the Patriots that has spanned three decades.

He has won a record four Super Bowl MVP awards and has been the NFL's season MVP three times — in 2007, 2010 and 2017. He is also the oldest quarterback to win a Super Bowl, guiding the Patriots to victory over the Los Angeles Rams last year at the age of 41.

Brady's nine total Super Bowl appearances are also a record for any NFL player, a testament to his remarkable longevity. His departure from New England ends one of the NFL's iconic double-acts, with Patriots head coach Bill Belichick.

Belichick has been in charge in New England from the start of Brady's career, plucking him from obscurity with the 199th pick of the 2000 NFL draft and moulding the youngster into a champion quarterback.

Brady has repeatedly stated that he plans to play until his mid-40s but speculation about his future had raged after he failed to reach agreement with the Patriots about an extension last year.

BELICHICK RIFT

Brady's relationship with Belichick has also reportedly come under strain in recent seasons, with the

quarterback increasingly at odds with the coach's austere, tough-love management style.

Nevertheless, Brady had remained close to the Patriots billionaire owner Robert Kraft, who told ESPN yesterday that he viewed the quarterback like a son. "It's not the way I want it to end, but I want him to do what is in his best personal interest," Kraft told ESPN.

"After 20 years with us, he has earned that right. I love him like a son." Brady was also visibly frustrated during what turned out to be his final season with the Patriots, often operating with an inexperienced receiving corps and badly missing the presence of retired tight end Rob Gronkowski.

The Patriots were bundled out in the wildcard round of the playoffs in January, suffering an upset defeat 20-13 defeat at home to the Tennessee Titans. Since that

playoff exit, Brady has been tightlipped about his future although a number of teams have reportedly been targeting him ahead of the start of free agency, which gets under way today.

He had been linked with a possible move to Tennessee but that option was taken off the table when the Titans reportedly opted to retain Ryan Tannehill instead. With the Titans out of the picture, three teams are seen as the likeliest options for Brady — the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the Los Angeles Chargers and the Las Vegas Raiders. While a move to Tampa Bay would be seen as a marked step down — they have not reached the playoffs since 2007 — both the Raiders and Chargers might be attractive to Brady for different reasons.

The Raiders will start next season in their sparkling new stadium in Las Vegas while the Chargers, who split with veteran quarterback Philip Rivers at the end of last season, are also looking to make a marquee statement as they prepare to move into their new \$4.9 billion SoFi Stadium home in Los Angeles. — AFP

“Time to open a new stage for my life”

Olympic torch events downscaled over coronavirus

TOKYO: Tokyo 2020 organisers said yesterday they had taken the "heartbreaking" decision to scale back parts of the Olympic torch relay due to the coronavirus, but stressed that spectators would still be allowed to watch from the roadside.

Chief executive Toshiro Muto told reporters that the "grand start" of the torch relay from the disaster-hit Fukushima province would take place without spectators "in order to prevent the spread of infections".

Any spectators who are feeling unwell will be asked not to watch from the roadside and torch-bearers with high temperatures will be barred from taking part, Tokyo 2020 said. "Please be careful to avoid forming crowds," organisers urged, saying the programme could be changed in the event of "excessive congestion".

The moves come as doubts increase whether the Games can open as planned on July 24, with the coronavirus decimating the global sports calendar, including Olympic qualifying events, and curtailing international travel.

Muto reiterated the Olympics would go ahead "as planned", although he acknowledged that "situations are changing from hour to hour". "It is heartbreaking for us," said Muto, referring to the relay.

Ceremonies to mark the flame's arrival at its final destination each day, as well as departure ceremonies, will take place without fans. So-called "welcome programmes" by local municipalities will be scrapped.

The flame is set to arrive on March 20, in Miyagi prefecture north of Tokyo, after the traditional lighting ceremony in Greece took place without spectators. Only 100 accredited guests from the International Olympic Committee and the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee, compared to the 700 planned originally, were allowed to attend the ceremony.

Greece then cancelled its leg of the torch relay after large crowds gathered to see the flame, despite repeated pleas to stay away. Hollywood actor Gerard Butler, who starred as the ancient Spartan King

Leonidas in the 2007 epic "300", was mobbed as he lit a cauldron in the city of Sparta.

'SERIOUS PROBLEMS'

Japanese Olympic organisers had already scaled down festivities to celebrate the flame's arrival at a military base, scrapping plans to involve 200 children. The Japan leg of the relay will kick off on March 26 from the "J-Village" sports complex, which was used as an operational base by workers scrambling to contain the crippled Fukushima nuclear reactors after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Japan has chosen the remote towns surrounding the Fukushima nuclear plant for the start of the relay to showcase the region's reconstruction.

Japanese officials have touted the summer Games as the "recovery Olympics", hoping to draw global attention and a sense of optimism to the region.

The relay will tour the nation and will end in Tokyo, more than 200 kilometres (120 miles) away from Fukushima. However, as the coronavirus continues its relentless march across the world, polls in the Japanese media suggest people increasingly believe it would be better to postpone the Olympics.

In a survey published yesterday, the Asahi Shimbun newspaper said 63 percent believed the Games should be postponed, while 23 percent said the Games should continue as scheduled. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike have insisted preparations for the Games are going ahead as planned, with the latter saying a cancellation is "unthinkable".

After a telephone meeting with other Group of Seven leaders on Monday, Abe said he had received their support to hold the Olympics "in its complete format" as a "symbol of mankind's victory" over the virus.

However, the decision rests with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), whose head Thomas Bach has stressed he will follow World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations regarding a possible postponement.

But he has also acknowledged that the cancellation of qualifying events was posing "serious problems". The IOC is scheduled to hold high-level talks on Tuesday before holding conference calls with sports organisations to discuss various issues, including qualifying.

Japan has seen 824 cases and 28 deaths related to the coronavirus outbreak, classified as a pandemic by the WHO. — AFP