

# Friday Times

ISSUE NO: 18086

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## Kuwait closes schools till August

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** The council of ministers yesterday extended the closure of schools and universities until August 4 as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, but the government has not taken a decision on imposing curfew.

Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi said the decision applies to public and private schools and that expat teachers can leave to their home countries and that the government will guarantee the payment of their salaries in full.

The minister said that the next school year will begin in December 2020, adding that the issue of payment of remaining fees to private schools has not been raised yet. Government

spokesman Tareq Al-Mazrem said that students in August will complete what remains of the school year.

Following a meeting yesterday, the cabinet called on the ministries of interior and health to step up the implementation of orders and penalties against violators of government directives regarding the coronavirus. But Mazrem said the cabinet did not declare curfew but it remains an option and will be imposed when the health authorities see it is necessary. The cabinet also ordered the defense and health ministries to prepare the international fair grounds as a field hospital in case it is needed to treat coronavirus cases.

Meanwhile, Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Al-Ghanem said the assembly will hold its session on

March 24 in order to approve two draft laws to toughen penalties on those who violate government directives or deliberately spread the disease. Another bill deals with delaying court cases and petitions until after the crisis. Ghanem said that the session will be brief and only MPs and a small number of employees will attend and all will have to test for the coronavirus on Sunday.

The ministry of health meanwhile announced six new cases of coronavirus raising the total to 148. The health minister announced that three more cases recovered to bring the total to up to 18. Of the new cases, four have returned from UK, two came in contact with the returnees, one of them a Filipina maid.

Of the 130 cases receiving treatment, five are at the intensive care unit with three of them in critical condition, according to the ministry. As many as 574 people have been released from quarantines. Health ministry spokesman Abdullah Al-Sanad said that the ministry has tested 35,000 expatriates for the virus and "some have shown symptoms of the disease" without providing further details about numbers.

In the meantime, MPs yesterday stepped up pressure on the government to declare the end of the school year by promoting students to the next grade. MP Saadoun Hammad said the decision will allow some 800,000 expat teachers and their families to leave for their home countries, thus reducing pressure on the country's health system.

### Zain breaks ground with live streamed AGM

- Applied MoH social distancing standards
- Innovative, digital solution to global crisis



Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi

**KUWAIT:** The Zain Group Annual General Meeting (AGM) was held yesterday at the Zain Group's headquarters in Kuwait, attended with a quorum of 69.95 percent that approved the recommended cash dividend of 33 percent (33 fils per share) to the shareholders already registered in the company's record date of 5 April 2020. Cash dividends will be paid to shareholders commencing 9 April 2020.

Additionally, a first by any corporate entity in Kuwait, the AGM approved Zain's adoption of a minimum cash dividend policy of 33 fils per share for three years, commencing 2019.

Furthermore, the AGM elected the Board of Directors for the next three years. The incoming Board members now constitute the following: Ahmed Tahous Al-Tahous, Representative of the Kuwait investment Authority; Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi, Elected; Yousef Khalid Abdul Razzaq, Representative of the Kuwait investment Authority; Talal bin Said Al-Mamari, Representative of Fajer Al Nasim for selling and buying stocks and bonds; Zaki Hilal Saud Al-Busaidi, Representative of Jawhara Al-Jebelah for buying and selling Stocks and bonds; Atef bin Saeed bin Rashid Al-Siyabi, Representative of Abeer Al-Shorouq for selling and buying stocks and bonds; Abdullah Salem Abdullah Al-Harthy, Representative of Naseem Al-Delta For buying and selling stocks and bonds; Martial Antoine Marcel Caratti, Representative of Dana Al-Qebala for selling and buying stocks and bonds; Abdulrahman Mohammad Ibrahim Al-Asfour, Independent. ( See Pages 33-34)



KUWAIT: Government spokesman Tareq Al-Mazrem speaks during a press conference yesterday as Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi looks on.

## Local

## Distance learning



Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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With schools and colleges closing or moving classes online to keep things going with the spread of COVID-19, many parents and students are exploring a new method - distance learning. But the concept seems disruptive and confusing. Some are wondering about the efficacy and success of this way of learning and testing, as it differs from the old typical method of face-to-face contact with a teacher in the classroom.

Of course, this difficult time requires strict measures to ensure everyone's safety, and right now distance learning is an effective method, because no one can predict when the virus outbreak will be over and students need to study and learn.

The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has assembled an online guide with links to distance learning apps. According to UNESCO, "an unprecedented number of children, youth and adults are not attending schools or universities because of COVID-19, with governments in 100 countries having announced or implemented closures. In 85 countries, schools nationwide have been closed, affecting more than 776.7 million children."

Distance learning is a way of learning remotely without being in regular face-to-face contact with a teacher in the class. Kuwait is one of many countries that shut down schools from the beginning of March. Some schools in Kuwait have voluntary initiatives to teach students online by using social media apps, especially since the end of the school year is approaching and there is not much time left to complete the curriculum.

Most countries of the world adopt this modern method of education because of its advantages, but in Kuwait, there is no recognition of distance education. This method did not receive much attention before the coronavirus crisis, but the ministry of education has started to consider adopting this method now as it will contribute to resolving the education crisis.

Without a doubt, the distance learning process is required, but it needs visual materials, electronic sources and teaching methods that take into account the special needs of students and modern trends of e-learning. I believe that it is easy to gather all these elements by communicating with British universities, for example, to obtain more reports and information on the best means of e-learning in a relatively short period of time to set an action plan to manage this issue.

I believe that keeping kids at home without education is not right, and I hope they will return to school after the end of the crisis, even if it means going back to school in July and August, which are the hottest summer months, because we are in an extraordinary time.

## In the same boat

Scribblers Notebook

By Jamie Etheridge

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My apartment has a balcony that overlooks Al-Tawoun Street in Salwa. It's a major highway, busy day and night with traffic. Across the road are several hotels and restaurants and down the street, one of the most popular public beaches, Anjafa. Even on weeknights, the street is alive with traffic, young men parading up and down the strip, playing loud music and chatting with friends or wedding processions with horns blaring as car after car passes up and down the street, celebrating some lucky couple's nuptials.

In the last few days, however, the area has become a ghost town. Restaurants are open for take-out or delivery only, and beaches and public parks have been closed until further notice. There is still traffic but it's light and infrequent; cars are few and far between as more and more people comprehend the seriousness of the situation and stay home.

As of yesterday, there are 220,230 cases worldwide, with 8,981 deaths so far recorded. In Kuwait, we are incredibly lucky. We've got 148 confirmed cases and no deaths till now. The government has moved swiftly to contain the spread, shutting schools, closing the airport, mosques and malls and effectively locking down the country to keep us all safe and healthy.

But the government cannot work alone. Every person living in Kuwait has a responsibility to do their part - staying home if that is possible and if not, making sure that we are in social distance when and where we can. Your mom's advice to wash your hands is now more important than ever.

Staying home is not an option for everyone. There are hundreds of thousands of doctors, nurses, lab technicians, delivery drivers, journalists, grocery store workers, pharmacists, police officers, security personnel, hospital staff, government officials, restaurant workers, veterinarians, bank employees, telecom staff, nursing home staff, garbage collectors, street cleaners and all the others whose work helps keep the country safe and operational.

Each one of these people are at risk of infection and when they go home, they put their families at risk too. We can help reduce that risk by limiting contact as much as possible so that even if more people get sick, their numbers do not grow so fast and exponentially that they overwhelm the healthcare system all at the same time.

The hardest part of this situation is the weird mix of emergency and boredom. At some moments I feel like I should be freaking out, panicking and calling all my loved ones back home to tell them how much I love them. At other times, I want to just Netflix and chill, play cards with my daughters and pretend like nothing is wrong. Even driving to the newspaper or the grocery store feels scary, although the country is safe, and the few minutes of panic buying that happened when the airport was closed has long since subsided.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for those of us not in the trenches (the doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers as well as the police and government) is the psychological test of how to maintain our calm and resilience in the face of fear and an uncertain future.

I try to be positive in all circumstances. For instance, the reduced human activity might have a really positive impact on the global climate crisis, returning our damaged planet to a state of fresh viridity, especially if the slowdown drags on for weeks or months.

It's also possible that this pandemic will cause many of us to reevaluate our lives, our priorities, our impact on our families, our communities and our environment. Each choice we make - even drinking from a paper cup, using a plastic bag at the market, driving hour-long commutes to work - has a consequence, and though many of us cannot change our daily circumstances, there are ways we can all be greener, slower and more thoughtful in our approach to life.

I would love to live a slower-paced existence, cook more at home, and spend more time with my children. That hasn't been a possibility for many years, but maybe now we will all get a chance to slow down.

The coronavirus pandemic is ravaging the entire globe. And there are many who have died, lost a loved one or who have an immunocompromised or at-risk family member, and we have to stand with them and help each other. This pandemic is reminding us - perhaps showing us for the first time - how truly connected and interconnected we all are. We are all in the same boat and will sink or float together.

## This Friday is different

IN MY VIEW

By Adellatif Sharaa

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Today is Friday, a day when one prepares himself to go for prayers, then return home to once again get ready to receive family members, go join them at a family gathering or go out somewhere! Yet this Friday is different. A game changer came into play that turned everything upside down. A virus, the coronavirus in specific, scared the globe from north to the south and from east to the west. It does not discriminate between the poor or rich, old or young. Most people remain at their homes out of fear as thousands of people have already been affected, and unfortunately, the number is still rising in some places where some authorities had lost control.

Kuwait had taken measures including the halt of prayers in mosques, including the Friday prayer, which makes me sad on

one hand, as this is the first time in my six decades of life that I cannot enter a mosque. But I find some solace, however, when I go back to reading about similar situations in Islamic history in particular. About 1,400 years ago, a plague hit an area in Palestine, and some troops did not enter, nor anyone left, following a saying by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which means that when an epidemic hits an area, no exit or entrance to the affected area are allowed.

This situation, while being tough, is necessary to protect human life, which is the most precious. Kuwait's government was among a few governments around the world to take early protective and preventive measures to fend off this virus, and felt the danger of this virus as it was spreading rapidly elsewhere.

Kuwait is dealing with the situation very seriously and is taking the steps to safeguard the health of the population, so it is necessary to prevent gatherings of all forms including gatherings at public places, mosques, churches, malls or anywhere else. It seems that authorities are having control over the matter so far. May Allah protect all humanity from this or any other evil. May Allah bless Kuwait.



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# WORLD ON

Public places around the world were left deserted after the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced several countries to be put on lockdown for weeks in a bid to prevent the rapid spread of the disease.



A French flag is under the Arc de Triomphe, yesterday in Paris, as a strict lockdown is in effect in France to stop the spread of COVID-19.

— AFP photos



A man wearing a protective mask looks at his phone while standing outside closed stores in Kuwait City on March 15, 2020. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



A closed children's playground is seen yesterday in Schoenebeck near Magdeburg, eastern Germany, where schools are closed and other activities slowed down due to the novel coronavirus.



General view taken yesterday of the empty Catalunya's square in Barcelona, amid the outbreak caused by the novel coronavirus.



A man wearing a face mask as a precautionary measure against covid-19, carries shopping bags as he walks across a deserted Trafalgar Square in London yesterday, as people stay away due the novel coronavirus.



A general view shows the river Tiber yesterday in Rome, during the country's lockdown within the new coronavirus pandemic.

# LOCKDOWN



Photo shows a deserted Lyon Bellecour square in Lyon, central eastern France, on March 17, 2020, as a strict lockdown comes into effect in France to stop the spreading of the COVID-19.



Shops closed in a once busy street in Kuwait City.



A cat walks in the deserted old city in Hebron in the Israeli occupied West Bank yesterday amidst a coronavirus Covid-19's pandemic.



A picture taken on March 18, 2020 shows deserted streets of the Alpine resort of Zermatt amid the spread of the COVID-19.



A picture taken on March 18, 2020 shows a deserted street in the Lebanese capital Beirut.

# People of Kuwait donate blood



KUWAIT: A large number of people visited Kuwait Blood Bank yesterday to donate blood in a humanitarian gesture to assist local medical authorities at this critical time. — KUNA photos



# Kuwait Times

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## Local

# Six new coronavirus cases in Kuwait, total infections at 148

## Three more coronavirus patients recover

**KUWAIT:** Six new cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) were discovered in Kuwait within the last 24 hours, bringing the total of infections to 148, the Health Ministry said yesterday. In a press conference, Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad revealed that out of the 148 in total, 18 cases recovered and 130 are still receiving treatment. He indicated that there are five cases still in the ICU with two stable and three in critical conditions. Some 574 individuals had finished the quarantine period, he affirmed.

Meanwhile, Dr Sanad indicated that number of swipe tests in Kuwait exceeded 14,000. Yesterday alone, more than 1,000 of such tests were conducted. He renewed an appeal to everyone to heed resolutions released by the Kuwaiti Cabinet, the Ministry of Health and other official departments, stressing on necessity of staying at

home, minimizing interaction with others, abstaining from gathering, in addition to adhering to quarantine, both at home or the specialized hospitals or other prepared places.

Citing reports by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other concerned agencies, Dr Sabah has re-affirmed that there are 166 global networks facing coronavirus, adding that total number of infections worldwide reached 198,000, cases outside China 117,000 and those inside the giant Asian nation 80,000. As to the 22-state Middle East, including Kuwait, he said only three countries in the region did not declare infections with the virus.

Moreover, there are 19 regional states with confirmed contamination cases, with the total number hitting 19,000, against 5,618 recovery cases. Globally, those who survived the disease amounted to 82,000. He confirmed a WHO re-

port noting that several states were cooperating to produce a vaccine to rid the human race of COVID-19. Another positive indication mentioned by Dr Sanad was a fresh declaration by China that all 34 infection cases recorded in the nation over the past 24 hours were related to travel.

In the meantime, Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced yesterday that three more patients recovered from the coronavirus (COVID-19), bringing the total number to 18. In remarks to the press, Sheikh Basel said analyses and laboratory x-ray tests proved that the three cases were cured of the virus. The recovered would be shifted to the recuperation ward of the hospital specialized for treating the COVID-19 patients, pending discharge during the coming days, he added. The three recovered are two Kuwaiti women and one Iranian national. — KUNA



**KUWAIT:** Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad speaks during yesterday's press conference. — KUNA

## Kuwaiti woman quarantined after breaking self-isolation

**KUWAIT:** A Kuwaiti woman has been put under quarantine after breaching self-isolation at home as a precautionary measure against coronavirus, the Ministry of Interior said yesterday. The move came after the woman had posted a video showing non-compliance with relevant guidelines by going to the Blood Bank for donation, the ministry said in a press statement. Therefore, the ministry urged citizens and residents to follow all decisions and instructions issued by concerned authorities regarding the fight against the contagious disease, warning that violators would inevitably face legal action.

The Ministry of Interior had affirmed on Wednesday that it will not tolerate violations of health authorities' ban of gatherings of people, like wedding receptions, with the objective of curbing spread of coronavirus. The Ministry's public relations department, in a statement to the press, urged the public to abide by resolutions enforcing the ban in a drive to avoid penalties: either fine or imprisonment. It explained the resolutions of the health ministry banned wedding reception either in public or private properties, as well as social gatherings except for family members. Police forces will make sure the public abide by the ban and will not tolerate violations, it said. — KUNA

## Govt coordinates Kuwaitis' return from abroad

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah said Wednesday that relevant government ministries were coordinating return of citizens from abroad. "We held many meetings with ministries of health, education and defense to coordinate return of citizens from abroad," Sheikh Ahmad said in remarks to Kuwait TV as part of the government's efforts to bring back citizens from countries facing spread of coronavirus. He said there were between 55,000 and 60,000 Kuwaitis abroad and efforts

were underway to bring them. "I renew the call on people who did not contact the diplomatic missions to do so in order to register their information" to facilitate their return, said Sheikh Ahmad. He said they have a short-term plan towards end of this month.

Sheikh Ahmad acknowledged this issue was of great concern to families of Kuwaiti citizens abroad, but assured the government was doing its utmost best to bring them back. He noted that His Highness the Amir was instructing the government to

take care of the citizens. He said everybody was following instructions issued by the health authorities. "We are following instructions of health authorities and to protect the country from harm" he said, and cited how health systems in advanced countries collapsed in the face of the huge number of coronavirus patients. "I once again urge people to abide by health regulations, containment helps in curbing the virus. As long as the health system is intact this will help in containment," said the Kuwaiti top diplomat. — KUNA

## National Guard official inspects quarantine centers



By Hanan Al-Saadoun

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait National Guard Undersecretary Lt Gen Hashem Al-Refae inspected the force responsible for securing

the two quarantine centers in Joan and Seashell Julaiah, which have been allocated to host people returning from abroad as a precautionary measure against the potential spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19).



Lt Gen Refae conveyed greetings of Kuwait National Guard Chief HH Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah and Deputy Chief Sheikh Mashaal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for their role in combating the spread of the virus.



## Local

# Kuwait: Grade 12 resumes August, grades 1-11 in October

## Next academic year starts in December 2020

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's government decided yesterday to resume studies for grade 12 by August and the remaining grades in October, part of the state's efforts to preserve wellbeing of students amidst spread of coronavirus because health situation in coming 8-10 weeks remains unstable. Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Dr Saud Al-Harbi, at a joint press conference with government spokesman Tareq Al-



### Coordination to import basic food needs

Mezrem, said some 38,000 students in grade 12 would resume on August 4. He said the students would have 5-6 weeks to complete modified curricula until late September.

Harbi said grades 1-11 would resume studies on October 4. The start of next academic year would be in December, 2020, said Harbi. He explained expatriate teachers and staff would be allowed to return to their countries until before resumption of studies.

Mezrem said closure of public and private schools, colleges and universities would be extended and they would reopen on Tuesday, August 4.

Mezrem, meanwhile, said the government assigned the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to coordinate with the public authority for industry and Kuwait Airways to import basic food needs. It also assigned the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Ministry of Health (MoH) to set up a field hospital at the International Fairs Group as soon as possible, he said. The government also assigned the MoD, MoH and relevant authorities to take legal action against people violating the communicable disease law, Mezrem added.



Government Spokesman Tareq Al-Mezrem

## Ministry receives 527 complaints in one day

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

**KUWAIT:** The Ministry of Commerce and Industry received 527 complaints over its hotline on Wednesday, while its teams checked 370 pharmacies and stores and issued 97 citations. Three stores were closed for failure to comply with the law and ministry decisions taken in precaution against the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Meanwhile, seven stores that were previously closed for the same reason were re-opened after their owners signed undertakings pledging to avoid repeating the violations. The ministry also said that it monitored 38 ration stores, and checked 15 bakeries, 42 butcher shops, livestock markets, and 104 vegetable stores.

### Municipality hotline

Kuwait Municipality received 230 complaints on its WhatsApp number from March 12-18, Municipality Spokesman Mohammad Al-Mutairi said. He added that the highest number of complaints was in Jahra governorate at 56, followed by Ahmedi at 43, while Hawally and Farwaniya had the same number of complaints at 39, Capital was fourth at 30 and finally, Mubarak Al-Kabeer at 23 complaints. He said 50 calls were received over the hotline "139" from citizens and expats inquiring about decisions and circulars. The emergency department operates 24 hours and receives complaints through WhatsApp at 24727732, and through its hotline at 139, he added. In other news, Kuwait Municipality said Jahra teams carried out a campaign in the governorate covering 71 stores, which resulted in issuing 20 citations for not following hygiene rules, in addition to 11 citations related to signboards. Separately, the Municipality's Funerals Affairs Director Dr Faisal Al-Awadhi said a team of volunteers washed and sterilized all cemeteries' buildings. He said this comes as part of social contribution to protect mourners and family members.

### Food distribution

The Public Authority for Manpower plans to carry out a campaign to distribute food products to security guards at its 24 buildings, Director General Ahmad Al-Mousa said. "This step comes in appreciation of their efforts as those employees are considered an important part of the authority," he said.

## National Assembly to convene on COVID-19 Tuesday

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said the parliament session, scheduled for Tuesday, will exclusively discuss draft emergency legislations to scale up the combat against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). "The majority of the other agenda topics of the session will be deferred to dates to be agreed by the MPs and the Assembly's Secretariat," he told reporters at the Assembly yesterday. The draft laws presented by the government and MPs, including those relating to the state budget have been referred to parliamentary ad hoc committees, he said, noting that the committee would report to the Assembly's Secretariat soon.

"In preparation for Tuesday session, the Assembly has enforced all safety precautions outlined by the Ministry of Health; these include bringing down the attendance of the Secretariat staff to the minimum and cutting short the time of the session," Ghanem disclosed. He noted that all attendees at the session will undergo COVID-19 tests between 12:00 and 14:00 on Sunday, urging the MPs to set good example for the public and abide by the precautions for big gatherings. He expressed hope that the session would agree the necessary laws for addressing the current health emergency posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ghanem praised as positive the cooperation between the executive and legislative authorities and the efforts of all state agencies to overcome the pandemic. On Wednesday, Ghanem said the government tabled a draft amendment to Article 17 of Act 8 (1969) re-



KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem speaks to reporters yesterday. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

garding the prerequisites of the public health and prevention against communicable diseases, as well as draft laws to launch an emergency response fund and a crisis management agency. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) distributed more than 1,270 meals to low-wage workers in Amghara yesterday, in support of state's efforts to encourage the public to stay indoors in a bid to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19). — KUNA photos



# Friday Times International

FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 2020



No layoffs, reduced rent - 'Italian cure' for virus pandemic

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## Scammers use coronavirus to trick fearful South Africans



HAUTS-DE-SEINE: Photo shows the empty motorway leading to the business district of La Defense, as a strict lockdown is in effect in France to stop the spread of COVID-19, caused by the novel coronavirus. — AFP

# World wages 'war' on virus

## West unleashes billions to shield economy in virus 'war'

**ROME:** World powers were on a war footing against the spiraling coronavirus pandemic yesterday despite a sign of hope from China where zero new domestic cases were reported for the first time. Italy extended its lockdown after suffering the world's highest single-day death toll while Europe and the United States unleashed nearly a trillion dollars to prop up the teetering global economy.

Across the planet, the death toll has risen to over 9,000 with more than 217,000 infections reported, according to an AFP tally based on official sources. As countries tried to stem the mounting crisis, Australia and New Zealand moved to seal off their borders with unprecedented entry bans aimed at halting the march of COVID-19.

China marked a major milestone by listing no new domestic infections for the first time since the outbreak first erupted in the central city of Wuhan in December, although a spike in imported cases threatened its progress. It appeared to have stanchied the virus with strict measures including a complete quarantine of Wuhan since January, meaning the number of infections and deaths in the rest of the world have surpassed those in China.

### 'No return to life before'

But elsewhere the pandemic was worsening quickly, with over 4,100 deaths in Europe-ex-

ceeding the 3,400 fatalities in Asia. Dire news came out of Italy on Wednesday which reported 475 new deaths, the highest single-day toll of any country, despite having imposed a national shutdown on March 12 that has been copied around the world.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said the lockdown would be prolonged to April 3, shattering



### China offers ray of hope

hopes that Italy's methods might herald a quick end to the crisis. "We will not be able to return immediately to life as it was before," he said. Italy has recorded about one-third of global deaths, while badly hit Iran also announced 149 new fatalities, raising its toll to 1,284. France also mooted extending its own two-week lockdown as the interior minister blasted "idiots" who flout home confinement rules and put others at risk.

### Bank bazooka

With countries paralyzed by the pandemic and stock markets imploding, policymakers this week unleashed a wave of measures to shore up the global economy. The European Central Bank late Wednesday announced a 750-billion-euro bond-buying scheme dubbed the "big bazooka", days after it unveiled a big-bank stimulus package that failed to calm anxious markets.

US President Donald Trump signed a \$100 billion emergency aid package to provide free coronavirus testing for those who need it, sick pay and paid family leave. European stocks staged an early rebound on the stimulus news, although Asian markets took another beating. But the sense of impending doom continues to cast a pall over the world economy with airlines, carmakers and others all warning of bleak times ahead.

"I view (myself) as a, in a sense, a wartime president. I mean, that's what we're fighting," Trump said Wednesday as he announced the deployment of military hospital ships to treat a fast-growing number of American patients. German Chancellor Angela Merkel took a similar tone, saying in an unprecedented televised address: "Not since the Second World War has our country faced a challenge that depends so much on our collective solidarity." Coronavirus cases in Germany soared past

10,000 on Thursday with over 2,800 new infections reported in a single day.

### 'Enemy against humanity'

Highlighting how the battle is only just beginning in the rest of the world, Russia reported its first death and sub-Saharan Africa also saw its first fatalities, while even the Pacific nation of Fiji said it had its first case. World Health Organization head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged countries to "come together as one against a common enemy: an enemy against humanity." He also warned Africa to "wake up" and prepare for the worst. The disease continued to hit high-profile people with EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier and two US members of Congress among those testing positive.

Countries are taking increasingly drastic steps to stem infections, with Australia and New Zealand banning non-residents from arriving. Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson had initially chosen a different path, closed dozens of London Underground stations ahead of a feared lockdown of the capital. Johnson on Wednesday finally followed the lead of his European counterparts and said schools would shut nationwide from Friday as the death toll topped 104, while putting 20,000 military personnel on alert. — AFP

## International

# Sub-Saharan Africa records the first coronavirus death

## 'Prepare for worst,' WHO warns

**OUAGADOUGOU:** Sub-Saharan Africa has recorded its first COVID-19 death, a high-ranking politician in Burkina Faso, as the head of the World Health Organization urged the continent to "prepare for the worst". "Africa should wake up," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a news conference in Geneva on Wednesday, pointing out that "in other countries, we have seen how the virus actually accelerates after a certain tipping point".

Africa has lagged behind the global curve for coronavirus infections and deaths, but in the past few days has seen a significant rise in cases. Experts have repeatedly warned about the perils for the continent, given its weak health infrastructure, poverty, conflicts, poor sanitation and urban crowding. Medical authorities in the poor Sahel state of Burkina Faso announced Wednesday that the number of infections there had risen by seven to 27 — and that one of them, a 62-year-old diabetic woman, had died overnight.

The country's main opposition party, the Union for Progress and Change (UPC), said in a statement that the victim was its lawmaker Rose-Marie Compaore, the first vice president of the parliament. South Africa, the continent's most industrialized economy, reported a more

than one-third jump in cases, with 31 new infections bringing its tally to 116. Nearby Zambia announced its first two confirmed cases - a couple that returned to the capital Lusaka from a 10-day holiday in France. As of Wednesday, a tally of reported cases compiled by AFP stood at more than 600 for all of Africa.

Of these, 16 cases have been fatal: six in Egypt, six in Algeria, two in Morocco, one in Sudan and one in Burkina Faso. Those figures are relatively small compared to the rest of world - the global death toll has passed 8,800 with almost 210,000 total infections. WHO chief Tedros said sub-Saharan Africa had recorded 233 infections, but warned the official numbers likely did not reflect the full picture. "Probably we have undetected cases or unreported cases," he said.

### 'We live day-to-day'

Watching from afar as disaster unfolds in Asia and Europe, some African countries have wasted little time in ordering drastic measures. Air traffic has been particularly hard hit, as many of Africa's initial cases were detected in people who had returned from affected countries in Europe and the Middle East. Some countries, such as Somalia, Chad, Guinea-Bissau and, most recently, the

wandering through shops and markets, are all but empty. "The crisis now is new," he said. "We are killed with corona. We have zero percent income," he added, warning that he may have to lay off two of his four employees.

### Old City, 'dead city'

More than three million people visit Jerusalem each year, most of whom pass through the walled Old City, which encloses in less than a square kilometre sites holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims. Last year, Tzoghig Karakashian celebrated the 100th anniversary of her family's ceramics shop in the Old City. Speaking to AFP on Monday, before the ban on non-essential movement came into force, Karakashian said her employees had preferred to stay home to avoid contracting the virus.

But the chatty woman of Armenian origin said she could not bring herself to close the store - not that staying open did much good. "I haven't seen a single customer today," she said, sighing. "The Old City is a dead city. Why should they come? There is nothing to do."

She said people were more afraid now than they were during the intifadas. Those "were political," she told AFP. "This is not political. Now it's a health issue. That's very different." Her brother Moses Aintablian, who owns a shop nearby, agreed that people were more fearful now than during the past conflicts. "People are more scared of the virus. People know the war starts and will finish," he said. "But this one, nobody knows if it's going to finish, or get worse, nobody knows." — AFP



**OUAGADOUGOU:** People wearing face masks are seen leaving the funeral of the first victim of the COVID-19 coronavirus in sub-saharian Africa, in Ouagadougou. — AFP

island of Madagascar have moved to stop all flights into their countries.

On Wednesday, Cape Verde - a tropical archipelago off Africa's west coast that is heavily dependent on tourism - and the continent's most populous nation, Nigeria, joined others in ban-

ning flights from the countries most affected by coronavirus. Burkina Faso has ordered the closure of all schools and barred all public and private gatherings until the end of April. There was concern on the unusually quiet streets of the capital Ouagadougou on Wednesday. — AFP

## Lagos closes schools; virus shadow lengthens over Africa

**LAGOS:** Sub-Saharan Africa's biggest city, Lagos, announced yesterday it would shut schools and limit religious gatherings to help fight the spread of coronavirus. A day after Burkina Faso announced the first virus fatality south of the Sahara, authorities in Nigeria's sprawling economic hub also declared curbs on gatherings.

"After consulting with our healthcare professionals over COVID-19, we are closing down schools and limiting religious gathering," Lagos state governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu wrote on Twitter. "We are limiting gatherings and events to no more than 50 people and appropriate social distancing must be observed." The state government said schools in the city of some 20 million people would be shut from Monday.

Africa's most populous nation-home to around 200 million people-has so far recorded just eight confirmed cases of COVID-19 and is following other countries on the continent in ratcheting up its response to the global pandemic. The central government on Wednesday announced an entry ban on 13 countries worst-

hit by the new coronavirus. The continent's largest oil producer has also said it will slash spending worth billions of dollars from its budget as a collapse in crude prices hammers its revenues.

### Enforcement problem

Imposing the new restrictions on the chaotic and overcrowded streets of Lagos will be a major challenge for the authorities. The city is home to an array of so-called "megachurches" where thousands of worshippers typically gather each weekend for services.

Meanwhile, the Sahel state of Burkina Faso, which on Wednesday reported the first death from coronavirus in sub-Saharan Africa, said the number of detected cases had risen to 35. The national coordinator for the fight against the disease, Martial Ouedraogo, said yesterday most of the infections had been reported in the capital Ouagadougou. Others were in Houede 250 kilometers away and in Bobo Dioulasso, the country's second largest city. "The spread is in peaks and troughs," Ouedraogo told reporters.

On Wednesday, Ouedraogo said the tally of cases stood at 27, including a fatality—a 62-year-old female legislator who had been suffering from diabetes. Coronavirus has been slow to spread-or be detected-in sub-Saharan Africa, which experts fear is deeply vulnerable to the disease. Africa has 675 known cases of the virus, according to a tally compiled by AFP. Health specialists say the continent is a potential breeding ground for the virus, given poor sanitation, poverty, urban over-crowding and creaking medical systems. — AFP

## In Jerusalem's Old City, virus 'worse than war'

**JERUSALEM:** Munib Abu Assab, a tour operator in Jerusalem's Old City, has seen deserted streets before, but he said not even past conflicts over the contested land compare to the impact of coronavirus. The 56-year-old Palestinian has lived through the 1967 Six Day War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the threat of Iraqi scud missiles in the 1991 Gulf War and two Palestinian intifadas, or uprisings.

So far 2020 "is the worst year I have had in my life," said Assab, who currently spends most of his time cancelling tours after Israel imposed tight travel restrictions to contain the pandemic. Israel has 433 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with another 44 in the occupied Palestinian territories and tens of thousands in self-isolation. It has banned non-essential movement and ordered the closure of all leisure and entertainment venues.

Assab noted that business was, not surprisingly, low during the Second Intifada that engulfed Israel from 2000-2005, which included waves of suicide bombings and deadly Israeli responses. But he said that even then he had a day or two worth of income each week. Now Jerusalem's ancient alleyways, typically crammed with tourists visiting sacred sites or

## International

# 'No funerals': Virus death leaves nowhere to grieve

## Coronavirus death toll mounts

**CREMONA:** Struck down by coronavirus at the age of 83, the long life of Alfredo Visioli ended with a short ceremony at a graveyard near Cremona, his hometown in northern Italy. "They buried him like that, without a funeral, without his loved ones, with just a blessing from the priest," said his granddaughter Marta Manfredi who couldn't attend. Like most of the old man's family - like most of Italy - she was confined to her home.

"When all this is over," she vows, "we will give him a real funeral." Everywhere the coronavirus has struck, regardless of culture or religion, ancient rituals to honor the dead and comfort the bereaved have been cut short or abandoned for fear of spreading it further. The virus, which has killed nearly 9,000 people worldwide, is reshaping many aspects of death, from the practicalities of handling infected bodies to meeting the spiritual and emotional needs of those left behind.

In Ireland, the health authority is advising mortuary workers to put face masks on dead bodies to reduce even the minor risk of infection. In Italy, a funeral company is using video links to allow quarantined families to watch a priest bless the deceased. And in South Korea, fear of the virus has caused such a drop in the number of mourners that funeral caterers are struggling for business. There is little time for ceremony in hard-hit cities such as Bergamo, northeast of Milan, where the mortuaries are full and the crematorium is working around the clock, said Giacomo Angeloni, a local official in charge of cemeteries.

Bergamo, home to about 120,000 people, has been dealing with 5-6 times the number of dead it would in normal times, he said. Italy has now reported nearly 3,000 deaths from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus - the highest outside China where the virus first

emerged. The Italian army sent 50 troops and 15 trucks to Bergamo on Wednesday to take bodies to less overwhelmed provinces.

A ban on gatherings has shattered the vital rituals that help us grieve, said Andy Langford, the chief operating officer of Cruse Bereavement Care, a British charity providing free care and counseling to those in grief. "Funerals allow a community to come together, express emotion, talk about that person and formally say goodbye," he said. "When you feel you have no control over how you can grieve, and over how you can experience those last moments with someone, that can complicate how you grieve and make you feel worse," he said.

### Extra staff

In Iran as in northern Italy, hospital and funeral workers are overwhelmed with bodies, as the virus has torn across the country, killing 1,284 people and infecting thousands, according to state TV. The authorities have hired new people to dig graves, said a manager at Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra cemetery. "We work day and night," he said. "I have never seen such a sad situation. There are no funerals."

Most corpses arrive by truck and are buried without the ritual washing that Islam dictates, he said. Some Iranians suspect that the official haste to bury them has more to do with obscuring the spiraling death toll than halting the spread of the virus. Deaths from COVID-19 have been recorded as heart attacks or lung infections, a hospital worker in Kashan, a city about a three-hour drive from Tehran, told Reuters.

"The officials are lying about the death toll," the worker said. "I have seen dozens of corpses in the past few days, but they have told us not to talk about it." Two nurses at Iranian hospitals

record of 475 on Wednesday plateau and start to come down this month. Other European nations are now taking on Italy's painful social distancing measures - and Conte believes they will also adopt his remedy for families and businesses hurt by the fight against the invisible killer disease.

"When we talk about the Italian model, we are not only talking about health but also the economic response to the crisis," Conte said while unveiling his "Cura Italia" ("Italian Cure") plan at the start of the week. Other European countries will probably never take on all 127 of the points that Conte - a former law professor - and his team of technocratic ministers drafted in the heat of Italy's gravest emergency since World War II. But here are the broad outlines of what Conte thinks could be a pan-European response plan.

### Worker rights

Companies are prohibited from laying off workers for the next two months without "justified objective reasons". The self-employed and seasonal workers such as tour guides can expect a 600-euro (\$680) payment for the month of



**BERGAMO:** Undertakers wearing a face mask move a coffin out of a hearse at the Monumental cemetery of Bergamo, Lombardy, as burials of people who died of the new coronavirus are being conducted at the rhythm of one every half hour. — AFP

also told Reuters they thought the death toll was higher than the official tally. Iranian authorities have rejected allegations of a cover-up, and President Hassan Rouhani, in a televised speech on Mar 18, said his government had been "honest and straightforward with the nation."

### Infection risk

In several countries, clusters of infection have followed funerals. In South Korea, where more than 90 people have died, the government has urged the families of COVID-19 victims to cremate their loved ones first, and hold the funeral later. Korean funerals usually take place in hospitals, and involve three days of prayers and feasting. Most of the country's early cases were

linked to a church in Daegu city and a hospital in a nearby county. In February, several members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus attended a funeral at the hospital for the brother of the church's founder.

Since the outbreak, the number of mourners at funerals has plunged by 90%, regardless of whether the deceased had the virus, said Choi Min-ho, secretary general of the Korea Funeral Association. "The culture of funerals has changed significantly," he said. "A handful of mourners quickly offer condolences and leave the place without dining together out of infection worries." Condolence money, traditionally handed over in cash, is now sent via bank transfer, he added. — Reuters

March to help cushion the pain of lost business. The government will also cover 100-euro bonuses for low-wage employees.

### Baby sitters

Families are issued 600-euro vouchers to cover the expense of having to hire baby sitters to look after their children, who will be out of school at least until April 3. The Italian government said Wednesday that its month-long shutdown of everything from kindergartens to private universities might run well into next month. The self-employed who have to look after their kids will receive "parental leave" payments that cover half of their declared monthly incomes. These payments can also be calculated on a daily basis.

### Rent and mortgage

Conte has shut down all forms of business except for pharmacies and grocery stores for two weeks starting on March 12. The government is compensating shop owners by offering them tax credits to cover 60 percent of their March rent payment. The self-employed and freelancers with

home mortgages can ask to have their payments suspended for up to 18 months if they can prove that their incomes fell by a third.

### Taxes

A variety of taxes and social service payments are being suspended for sectors and professions deemed most affected by the crisis. An existing list has been expanded to include everyone from truck drivers and hotel staff to cooks and clerks. The government expects to start collecting the taxes again in May.

### Politics and prisons

A variety of other measures affect issues ranging from prisons to politics and sport. A planned national referendum to cut the number of parliament members has been postponed until the second half of the year. The government is sending 20 million euros to repair the damage caused to prisons by rioters who were anxious about the new disease. Italy's sport federations get four-month tax privileges and 130 million euros will go to support cinemas and the movie industry. — AFP

## No layoffs, reduced rent: 'Italian cure' for pandemic

**ROME:** Companies are barred from laying off workers and rents have been reduced under Italy's economic survival plan for life at the European epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte hailed his 25-billion-euro (\$28-billion) program as the "Italian model" that the rest of Europe could adopt as it imposes its own painful lockdowns.

Italy's 2,978 official COVID-19 deaths account for more than half of those reported outside China. Its nationwide containment measures are meant to see death rates that hit a global one-day

## International

# From hero to zero: Coronavirus upends livelihoods across Europe

## Millions may face losing jobs across Europe

**DUBLIN:** On Sunday morning, Irish chef C Greene woke up to the review of his life. Britain's Observer newspaper told readers his cooking would make them "thrillingly giddy and euphoric". Hours later he was out of a job. Bastible, the Dublin restaurant where he was head chef, was closing as a result of the growing threat from the coronavirus. Greene, 27, and 13 colleagues were all let go.

"When you get a great review, it's a special week every time, and those weeks turn into great months. That's what's upsetting because with what's going on, you feel slightly stunted," said Greene, who worked in the world famous Danish restaurant Noma before returning home to Dublin. "That's very hard to take, I have to admit and that's what makes me turn at night."



### Pandemic lays waste to hospitality sector

Greene's woes are an example of how the coronavirus pandemic is laying waste to hospitality businesses across the board, irrespective of size or success. Employers across Europe are slashing jobs at a ferocious pace as emergency lockdowns shutter bars, restaurants and hotels, empty offices and ground airlines. It will be months before official national data reveals the scale of the destruction but the International Labor Organization warned on Wednesday that up to 25 million jobs could be

lost globally if governments don't act fast, outpacing the 22 million jobs lost during the 2008-09 financial crisis.

European countries have pledged hundreds of billions of euros to mitigate the economic impact of the virus and have eased the rules to make it easier for people to qualify for unemployment benefit and to help companies keep workers on. In Italy, the epicenter of the outbreak in Europe, the state has gone one step further, suspending any firing procedures begun after February 23. But even with the promises of cash, the scale of the crisis has authorities scrambling to deal with the demand for help.

### 'Savings won't last'

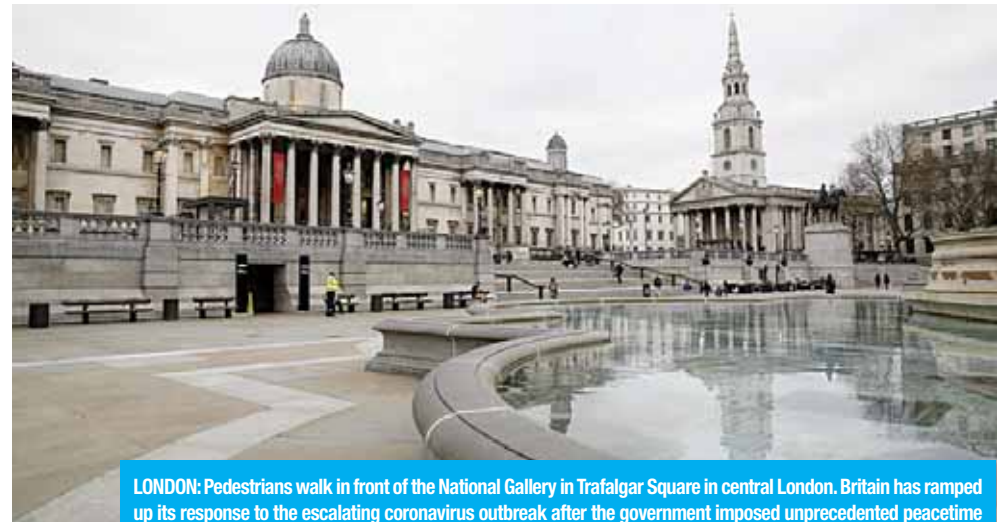
In Ireland, where Prime Minister Leo Varadkar estimated 100,000 people or more - almost 5% of the work-

force - could lose their jobs within two weeks, about 20,000 people presented at unemployment offices to apply for benefits on Friday. In Germany, where joblessness had reached historic lows, companies have flooded local authorities with requests for state aid to finance short-time work. "It's going through the roof," a spokeswoman for the Federal Labor Office said, adding that there was also interest from sectors that normally don't apply for such measures.

statistics are available, 66 percent of families with children under 18 brought home two paychecks, up from 49 percent in 1970.

With Covid-19 closing businesses nationwide, spouses sharing the home office are discovering unsuspected work habits of spouses they thought they knew well. A meme making the rounds on social media has suggested couples working at home invent an invisible colleague, then blame that colleague for bad behavior such as leaving dirty coffee mugs around the house. Marriage therapists say two-career couples must show mutual respect for one another's work habits and set boundaries if they want marital harmony to survive in self-quarantined home offices.

"You have to find ways to build in some distance even if you're in a small space," said Alon Gratch, a New York psychologist. "That could be by working with ear phones and with agreed-upon rules that you don't interrupt each other's work." Mark Berkley, 49, a software designer who needs quiet to concentrate, and his wife Susan Halper Berkley, 49, a loquacious executive at a medical communications agency, spent the entire weekend fixing up their attic home office in Maplewood, New Jersey, after their New York offices were shuttered by coronavirus. But their shared workweek had a rocky start. —Reuters



**LONDON:** Pedestrians walk in front of the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square in central London. Britain has ramped up its response to the escalating coronavirus outbreak after the government imposed unprecedented peacetime measures prompted by scientific advice that infections and deaths would spiral without drastic action. —AFP

In Belgium, about 30,000 firms have applied for temporary unemployment benefits for nearly 300,000 workers, a government spokesman said. If granted, the measure allows workers to be paid 70% of their salary by the state. The abruptness of the layoffs across Europe, coupled with the growing proportion of contract workers who may not qualify so easily for unemployment benefit, mean not everyone will be protected.

Over 100,000 workers across Spain have

been let go due to the coronavirus, and the total number could reach 1 million, the head of one of Spain's largest unions has said. In central Barcelona, Alejandra Paola Carrera, 27, is worried she won't qualify for state support because she only started contributing to the social security system last July. "My savings won't last me more than a month," said the office administrator who lost her job on Monday. "I rent a flat with three others and we're all in the same situation: temporary workers, and just fired." —Reuters

## For better or worse, virus tests couples share home offices

**NEW YORK:** Before coronavirus shut his office, Scott Ford worked with his phone in one hand and chatted with his dozens of co-workers as he paced around their desks at Techstars, a startup accelerator based in Boulder, Colorado. Now he sits across a shared desk from his wife, a proof-reader for a publishing company who demands total silence so she can focus on her job in their newly occupied home office in Superior, Colorado. "I have no one to talk to, although she sits about 24 inches from me," Ford, 50, told Reuters in a phone interview. "I'll read something and say 'Hey, can I tell you something?' and I'll break her concentration. It drives her crazy."

Coronavirus is challenging not just health but also home life for an unprecedented number of two-career American couples forced to work at home, at times in close quarters. With more women in the US workforce, dual-income families have become the norm, according to Pew Research Center. In 2016, the latest year for which

## Facebook scrambles as use soars in time of isolation

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Facebook said it would place "authoritative" coronavirus content at the top of user feeds as it scrambled to keep up with increased usage and stem the flow of misinformation on its platform and WhatsApp messaging. The leading social network said it has nearly doubled server capacity to power WhatsApp as people in isolation place more voice and video calls using the popular messaging service. Facebook also donated \$1 million to the International Fact-Checking Network to expand the presence of local fact-checkers and curb misinformation on WhatsApp, said Facebook head of health Kang-Xing Jin.

"Teams are hard at work to make sure all the services run smoothly, because this is clearly a time when people want to stay connected," Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said while up-

dating reporters on the company's efforts. "We want to make sure we do our part to alleviate loneliness." As part of an effort to be a resource for reliable information about the coronavirus crisis, Facebook is rolling out an information center that will be displayed at the top of news feeds at the social network.

The information hub was built in collaboration with health organizations and will roll out in the US and Europe through Wednesday, with plans to expand it to other locations. "Our goal is to put authoritative information in front of everyone who uses our services," Zuckerberg said. The hub will display content from public health experts, celebrities, academics and others encouraging ways to reduce coronavirus risk - such as by taking social-distancing seriously, according to Zuckerberg.

Facebook is under intense scrutiny regarding how it prevents hoaxes or dangerously misleading information regarding the deadly pandemic from spreading on its platform, according to Creative Strategies analyst Carolina Milanesi. "It's not politics. It's not (an) election. This is killing people," Milanesi said of the importance of getting people the truth about the coronavirus. —AFP

## International

# Scammers use coronavirus to trick fearful S Africans

## South Africa's central bank warns citizens

**JOHANNESBURG:** South Africa's central bank has warned citizens against scammers visiting homes to "recall" banknotes and coins they said were contaminated with the novel coronavirus. The criminals carried fake identification badges and provided false receipts to victims, who were told they could exchange the slips for "clean" cash at any bank.

The bank said in a statement issued late Monday that it had "neither withdrawn any banknotes

or coins nor issued any instruction to hand in banknotes or coins that may be contaminated". "There currently is no evidence that the COVID-19 virus is transmitted through the use of banknotes and coins," said the statement. To date South Africa has recorded 62 cases, the second-highest number of coronavirus infections in Africa after Egypt. Officially known as COVID-19, the virus has infected almost 180,000 people worldwide and killed more than 7,000.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has announced the closing of schools and banned public gatherings after numbers more than tripled over the week-end. Foreign nationals from highly-affected countries will also be denied entry from Wednesday, as the majority of South Africa's cases had recently travelled abroad. Tricksters took advantage of nervous citizens on Monday, as many people remained home and rushed to supermarkets to stock up on groceries.

South Africa's biggest private healthcare provider Netcare warned that thieves, masquerading as doctors screening for coronavirus, were going round trying to gain access into people's homes. "Criminals are going to homes in various areas claiming to be from Netcare... with door-to-door screening for COVID-19," said a statement by the Netcare group. "Please note that staff... are not doing door-to-door COVID-19 screening." —AFP

## US prisons a potential coronavirus 'tinderbox'

**WASHINGTON:** As the United States grapples with the coronavirus pandemic, there is concern not only for the elderly but also for another vulnerable population: prisoners. The US has the highest rate of incarceration in the world and experts have warned that infections could potentially spread rapidly in the country's crowded prisons.

Christopher Blackwell, 38, is serving a 45-year sentence for murder and robbery at a facility in Washington state, which has the most new-coronavirus deaths in the country. In an article published by The Marshall Project, a group that advocates for criminal justice reform, Blackwell said he was "not surprised" to learn last week a prison employee had tested positive for COVID-19.

He also said he was not reassured by the response of the Washington State Reformatory authorities. "They posted signs down by the phones instructing us to put a sock - yes, like you wear on your foot - over the phone receiver before using it in order to avoid spreading germs," Blackwell said. Inmates had been advised to maintain cleanliness but alcohol-based hand sanitizer is banned and even rags are hard to come by, he said. Blackwell was particularly worried about elderly inmates, including a friend in his 80s who he identified as "Bill."

"Bill is one of the many prisoners currently under lockdown," Blackwell said. "He, and people like him, are in severe danger. How can we protect people like Bill in a place many have referred to as a 'tinderbox' for a virus like COVID-19?" he asked. The US has some 2.2 million people behind bars, nearly one-fourth of the world's entire prison population. Civil rights groups, doctors and lawmakers have been sounding the alarm about the deadly potential of coronavirus spread behind prison walls.

Fifteen Democratic senators wrote a letter last week to the federal Bureau of Prisons asking what measures were being taken to protect inmates. "Given the spread of the virus in the US - and the particular vulnerability of the prison population and correctional staff - it is critical that BOP has a plan," they said. Their appeal gained urgency this week when the local press reported guards have tested positive for coronavirus at Rikers Island and Sing Sing prisons in New York state. —AFP

## In Colombia, cartel narco-submersibles poses challenge for navy

**TUMACO:** For years, they were referred to in hushed tones simply as "Big-foot"—a mythical creature rumored but never seen—but these days, the narco-submersibles used by Colombia's drug cartels have become almost commonplace. With cocaine production at an almost record high in the South American country, authorities on the southwestern coast say the crude semi-submersible craft have become a favored tool to smuggle drugs towards the United States—and even to Europe.

Thirty-three submarines were intercepted in 2019 alone, an average of almost three a month—most of them along Colombia's Pacific coast. That is a major concern for Rear Admiral Mattos Dager and his "Poseidon" task force against drug trafficking. "Large quantities of cocaine are transported by sea," Dager said. "It is much easier to move a ton of cocaine by sea than by plane because there are more checks on freight at airports."

According to the rear admiral, 80 percent of Colombia's illicit drug trade goes out through the Pacific and 14 percent is sent via the Caribbean. The rudimentary submarines fashioned in secret workshops in the depths of Colombia's mangrove-fringed northwestern Pacific coast are notoriously difficult for navy patrols or radar to detect.

They cruise "flush with the surface of the water, and the superstructure that protrudes above the surface is very small," Dager said. For all their recent success, Dager and his squad know that this is probably only the tip of the iceberg. As with all drug shipment finds, once the initial euphoria subsides, there is the feeling that many more get through than are ever detected. Last year, authorities seized 433 tons of cocaine—more than half of that by the navy—though production was estimated to be more than 1,000 tons.

### '20,000 leagues'

The long-posed question of whether one of the narco-submersibles could be sophisticated and durable enough to cross the Atlantic was answered in November when a 22-meter vessel was discovered off Spain's Galician coast. The semi-submersible was carrying around three tons of cocaine. Two of its three crew members were reportedly from Ecuador.

Evidence of the successes of Dager's task force is littered among the mangrove roots around its base in the southwestern port of Tumaco. Painted in blue, gray and pastel greens, their rustic fiberglass hulls appear to have more in common with Jules Verne's "Nautilus" in his 19th century novel "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" than a sophisticated seagoing submersible.

But these low-profile boats are designed to take to the sea with their decks awash, carrying their cargo just beneath the waves and out of sight. Tumaco is situated just north of the Ecuador border, in Colombia's south-



**TUMACO:** Colombian Counter admiral Mattos Dager, commander of the Task Force against Drug Trafficking number 72, shows a 'parasite' type homemade narco-submarine, which is attached to the hull of large ships, in Tumaco, Colombia. —AFP

western Narino department, which has more land under coca cultivation than anywhere else in the country—about a quarter of the 169,000 hectares under cultivation in 2018. Nicknamed "the Pearl of the Pacific" for its stunning beaches but plagued by the nation's long conflict with narco gangs, Tumaco is a flashpoint in the war on drugs.

### 'Artisanal boatyards'

Rumors that the cartels were using submarines began in the 1990s, but it was not until 2006 that the navy finally intercepted one, packed with 3.5 tons of cocaine, off Costa Rica. The labyrinth of mangroves that make up 80 percent of Colombia's Pacific coast provide ideal cover for "artisanal boatyards" where the custom-built subs are made, according to Colonel Nelson Ahumada Ojeda, commander of the 4th Infantry Brigade, responsible for the Narino coastal strip.

The army has little chance of tracing the subs' launching platforms in "a spider's web of some 1,500 streams," Ojeda said. The cramped subs are crewed by between two and four men, usually recruited from local fishing communities—often, they are Ecuadorians. In case of discovery by naval patrols, "they open the valves to let in water and sink the boat, sinking the evidence," before jumping in the water, said Captain Victor Santos Pacheco, commander of the local coast guard, which often finds itself rescuing the crews from the sea.

### Narco innovators

The vessels can reach Central America in two or three days. Those that head further north to the Mexican or US coast are replenished at sea with water, food, and fuel, indicating elaborate logistics. Crew members can earn up to \$50,000 for a long crossing, but see it as a risk worth taking, according to officials. "A kilo of cocaine is worth \$30,000 on the streets of New York," said Dager. —AFP

# Coronavirus thumps Brazil, prompting nationwide cries of 'Bolsonaro Out!'

## Senate president, two ministers test positive for coronavirus

**RIO DE JANEIRO:** The coronavirus outbreak hammered Brazil on Wednesday, crushing local markets, infecting more members of the country's political elite and prompting loud protests against President Jair Bolsonaro, whose son waded into a diplomatic spat with China. Bolsonaro's national security adviser, the mines and energy minister and the head of the Senate all tested positive for the virus on Wednesday, as the death toll rose to four dead with 428 people infected.

Bolsonaro has come under mounting criticism for his lax handling of the outbreak, which he initially labeled a "fantasy." The virus' spread represents a major threat for the far-right populist, who was already struggling to resuscitate the country's weak economy. On Wednesday night, Brazil erupted to the sound of banging pots and pans and shouts of "Bolsonaro out!" with housebound protesters expressing their anger toward the president.

The protests took place in major Brazilian cities and even included projections of "Bolsonaro out!" onto the sides of buildings, according to social media videos. Bolsonaro says he has twice tested negative for the coronavirus, but 14 people in his entourage to Florida 10 days ago have tested positive. The fallout from the trip, in which he met US President Donald Trump, haunts him.

In a fresh headache late on Wednesday, his son Eduardo, a federal lawmaker who also traveled to meet Trump, sparked a diplomatic dust-up with China, Brazil's top trade partner. In a tweet, he likened China's role in the coronavirus outbreak to that of the USSR during the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, alleging a cover-up. "It's China's fault and freedom is the answer," he tweeted. His comments,

which echoed those of Trump, sparked an angry response from the Chinese embassy, which said he had contracted a "mental virus" while in the United States.

"Sadly, you are a person without any international vision or common sense," it tweeted at him. "We suggest you don't rush to become the US spokesman in Brazil, or risk an ugly fall." With criticism mounting, the president held an afternoon news conference with ministers - all wearing masks - to announce emergency measures to contain the virus and buttress the economy, including assistance for poorer families and support for a struggling aviation industry. Financial markets were rattled by the fast-spreading virus that causes the COVID-19 respiratory disease.

The benchmark Bovespa stock index closed 10% lower, bond yields spiked and Brazil's currency hit an all-time low of 5.2 per dollar before central bank measures in foreign exchange and bond markets helped to pare losses. After markets closed, the central bank cut its benchmark interest rate to an all-time low of 3.75% and pledged "to deploy its arsenal of monetary, exchange rate and financial stability policies to fight the current crisis."

In a fresh blow to many retail stocks, Sao Paulo Governor Joao Doria on Wednesday recommended the closure of shopping malls in the metro area of the country's biggest city, while Sao Paulo city hall also ordered commercial establishments closed to the public from Friday until April 5, with some exceptions. Airline association ABEAR said the sudden halt in travel was the worst crisis ever faced by Brazil's aviation sector. Demand for domestic flights in the second half of March fell 50% and interna-



**RIO DE JANEIRO:** Brazilian graffiti artist Aira Ocespo finishes an art piece featuring Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro reading "Bolsonaro's mask against the Coronavirus" at his studio in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Wednesday. Bolsonaro gave a press conference yesterday wearing a facemask as he spoke about the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

tional bookings were 85% down, ABEAR said.

Bolsonaro said Brazil was considering closing all its land borders, following a decree closing its border to Venezuelans, citing contagion risks and strains on the public health system. The decree, published on Wednesday, does not apply to trucks shipping goods or cross-border humanitarian aid previously authorized by health officials.

The 15-day ban on Venezuelans entering Brazil could be extended, it added. In another restriction of border traffic, land transport regulator ANTT suspended for 60 days all international bus services. Seven cities neighboring Sao Paulo, Brazil's biggest metropolis, said they would begin reducing municipal transportation until a total shutdown from March 29 onward.—Reuters

## WHO chief calls COVID-19 'enemy against humanity'

**GENEVA:** The head of the World Health Organization on Wednesday called the new coronavirus an "enemy against humanity", as the number of people infected in the pandemic soared past 200,000. Worldwide fatalities topped 9,000 and more deaths have now been recorded in Europe, the new virus epicenter, than in Asia since the outbreak first emerged in China in December. "This coronavirus is presenting us with an unprecedented threat," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told journalists in a virtual news conference.

He stressed the need for countries everywhere to "come together as one against a common enemy: an enemy against humanity." Sub-Saharan Africa has only recorded 233 cases and four deaths, making it the least affected region. But Tedros warned the situation could quickly shift. "In other countries, we have seen how the virus actually accelerates after a certain tipping point, so the best advice for Africa is to prepare for the

worst, and prepare today," he said. "Africa should wake up."

### 'Solidarity trial'

Tedros said the WHO was speaking daily with decision-makers worldwide "to help them prepare and prioritize." "Don't assume your community won't be affected. Prepare as if it will be," he said. The WHO has called for every single suspected case to be tested. In countries where that was not possible due to soaring numbers of infections, Tedros insisted there were measures to reduce the burden on healthcare systems and make epidemics more "manageable".

He urged states to introduce physical distancing measures, including cancelling sporting events, concerts and other large gatherings, to slow down transmission. But Tedros added that the only way to suppress and control epidemics of the virus was for countries to "isolate, test, treat and trace." If

countries fail to do that, he said, "transmission chains can continue at a low level, then resurge once physical distancing measures are lifted." Tedros hailed that the first vaccine trial had already begun just two months after China shared the genetic sequence of the virus, calling it "an incredible achievement."

He also said WHO was launching a "solidarity trial" of five proposed treatments for the virus across 10 countries to figure out which was most effective. But an actual roll-out of a vaccine remains far off. Tedros called on all countries to use a "comprehensive approach, with the aim of slowing down transmission and flattening the curve." "This approach is saving lives and buying time for the development of vaccines and treatments."

### Not just the elderly

Michael Ryan, who heads WHO's emergencies program, cautioned against downplaying the dan-

ger of COVID-19 for younger people. "This isn't just a disease of the elderly," he said, stressing that "a significant number of otherwise healthy adults can develop a more serious form of the disease." He called for the close observations of "even the mild cases for any signs of clinical progression towards a more serious disease."

Maria Van Kerkhove, who heads the WHO's emerging diseases unit, stressed that while children appear to be less affected, they too risked becoming seriously ill. One child had died in China, she noted. "We need to prepare for the possibility that children can also experience severe disease," she said. Asked about large variations in death rates being recorded in Europe, Ryan said there were several explanations. Germany, which has so far recorded 8,198 cases but just 12 deaths, has taken a very aggressive approach to testing he said, suggesting "they may be detecting more mild cases as a proportion of all cases."—AFP

## International

# Virus whistleblower doctor punished 'inappropriately'

## Li reprimanded for sharing information: China probe

**BEIJING:** Police in China's virus epicenter Wuhan acted "inappropriately" by punishing a doctor who blew the whistle on the outbreak that has now killed more than 9,000 worldwide, a Chinese government investigation found yesterday.

Li Wenliang, one of a group of doctors in Wuhan who shared posts on social media warning of a SARS-like virus spreading in the city in December, was reprimanded by police for sharing the information and made to sign a statement agreeing not to commit any more "law-breaking actions."

Li's death from the virus in February prompted a national outpouring of grief as well as anger at the government's handling of the crisis, and bold demands for freedom of speech.

A central government investigation initiated after Li's death found that Wuhan police "acted inappropriately by issuing a disciplinary letter" and took "irregular law enforcement procedures," state broadcaster CCTV reported yesterday. The investigators also found that Li's colleagues had repeatedly attempted to resuscitate the 34-year-old before he was declared

dead because he was "very young," CCTV said. State media said Li's colleagues told investigators, "as long as there was a bit of hope we were unwilling to give up, at the time there were no other factors." The central government investigators "suggest" that Wuhan authorities "supervise and rectify the matter," and urged local police to revoke the disciplinary statement issued to Li, according to CCTV.

Beijing has sought to direct criticism over the mishandling of the virus outbreak onto provincial officials, with several of the region's top Communist Party and health officials sacked.

Li's death had initially been reported by state media before their reports were quickly deleted. Wuhan Central Hospital only confirmed Li's death hours later, after saying he was undergoing emergency treatment. Social media users who immediately took to the Twitter-like Weibo platform in droves to mourn Li before posts related to his death were scrubbed by censors had accused hospital authorities of inappropriately attempting to resuscitate Li after he had already died.



**Coronavirus: Wuhan police 'inappropriately' punished whistleblower doctor Li Wenliang, Chinese gov't probe concludes.**

China reported zero domestic COVID-19 infections for the first time yesterday, even as nations across the world have shut down in a desperate effort to contain the pandemic. China's central government has sought to dis-

tantiate itself from the origins of the disease, initially by sacking local officials blamed for allowing the virus to spread, and recently by supporting the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 originated in the US. —AFP

## Rescued from Indian sex slavery, denied home by coronavirus

**MUMBAI:** Six Bangladeshi women rescued from four years of forced prostitution in India were stuck in limbo yesterday as coronavirus prevented their long-awaited return home. Their ordeal, following years of enforced prostitution, prompted calls for a relaxation in tangled bureaucracy so trafficking victims can head home to their families.

"Coronavirus has only added to the whole process of repatriation," said Tariqul Islam of Justice and Care, a charity that reintegrates victims in Bangladesh. "If India and Bangladesh had a standard operating procedure for repatriation, these girls would have been home within six months," Islam told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

The six women were tricked into leaving their hometown of Jessore in neighboring Bangladesh four years ago, then forced to work in Mumbai's thriving red-light district. They were rescued from a brothel 10 months ago, and were due to travel on March 26 when the virus halted free movement. The charity said any plans for a March homecoming were now off.

Four people in India have died since coronavirus first hit China, spreading worldwide and killing some 219,000 people.

The women, aged 25 to 30, have travel permits that expire at the end of March, and India has suspended all trains and bus services to Bangladesh to April 15. The Bangladesh Deputy High Commission office in Mumbai said there were no pending applications for travel permits. Should a travel permit expire before restrictions are lifted, another application can be made, the official said.



**KOLKATA:** A rehabilitated sex worker counts the multiplication table with her fingers during an education program run by a non-government organization "New Light" in the red light district of Kalighat in Kolkata. —Reuters

Roopa was among the six left in limbo, her ordeal in the sex trade compounded first by bureaucracy and now by coronavirus. As countries close borders to tackle the epidemic, anti-trafficking campaigners are calling for travel permits such as hers to remain valid once the restrictions end.

Living in a shelter, Roopa said she was devastated by the fresh delay and was desperate to see her family. "If this hadn't happened, I would have met my daughter next week. She is seven now. I really don't know what she likes," said Roopa, who used her first name to protect her identity.

"I speak to my mother back home, but my daughter stopped talking to me two months ago as she thought I was always lying to her about returning home," the 25-year-old told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone. Roopa was initially promised a servant's job in India, like thousands of Bangladeshis trafficked to India each year, many of whom are sold into prostitution or domestic servitude. — Reuters

## Thai hospitals deploy 'ninja robots' to aid virus battle

**BANGKOK:** Thai hospitals are deploying "ninja robots" to measure fevers and protect the health of overburdened medical workers on the frontlines of the coronavirus outbreak.

First built to monitor recovering stroke patients, the machines have been quickly repurposed to help fight the disease, which has so far killed nearly 9,000 people around the world. They have helped staff at four hospitals in and around Bangkok to reduce their risk of infection by allowing doctors and nurses to speak to patients over a video link. "They can stand outside the room and communicate with patients inside through the robot," said Viboon Sangveraphunsiri of Chulalongkorn University. Later models will be designed to bring food and medicine to patients, and could also eventually be used to disinfect hospital wards, Viboon told AFP. His engineering team is racing to build more "ninjas"—known as such because of their matte black exterior—for another 10 hospitals around the country.

Thailand has more than 200 confirmed COVID-19 infections, including at least one death. More than 40 have recovered and been discharged from hospital. Authorities recently ordered the closure of bars, massage parlors and entertainment venues to help prevent new cases. New rules also require visitors entering the country to produce a health certificate. Officials have so far stopped short of imposing the full lockdowns seen in other countries in a bid to contain damage to Thailand's crucial tourism sector. But the government's reassurances that the pandemic is under control have not stopped bouts of panic buying in grocery stores. Doctors are also urging Thais to stay home to curb the spread of the virus. —AFP



## International

# India locks down Kashmir over virus, Sri Lanka shelves election

## Delhi bans incoming international flights for a week over virus

**SRINAGAR/NEW DELHI:** India blocked roads in Kashmir yesterday after the insurgency-torn region reported its first case of coronavirus, as several other parts of the country imposed restrictions on public gatherings in attempts to prevent its spread. Elsewhere in densely-populated South Asia, Sri Lanka postponed parliamentary elections as the coronavirus epidemic spread in an area that had been relatively unscathed compared to elsewhere in the world.

New cases in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are all accelerating, with the total across the region nearing 600. Six people have died in the region after contracting the virus. Authorities worry that these countries could be especially at risk should the virus begin to spread locally, due to poor health facilities and infrastructure.

In Kashmir, dozens of people told Reuters they had been prevented from leaving their neighborhoods yesterday because roads were blocked by police and paramilitary units. Srinagar's senior superintendent of police Haseeb Mughal told Reuters that road blockades across the valley had been imposed to prevent the spread of the virus. "I had to go to take my mother to hospital in Srinagar but the police has closed the road," said Mohammed Ayub, from the nearby town of Budgam.

"I am waiting here for the last two hours. I can't even go home now as the road is blocked due to

a traffic jam." Muslim-majority Kashmir has been relatively unaffected by the virus, reporting its first case on Wednesday evening. But the picturesque valley of seven million is one of most militarized places on earth due a decades-long insurgency against Indian rule, and its residents have been subject to prolonged curbs on freedom of movement. An internet shutdown that began in August following sweeping constitutional changes in Kashmir has only just been eased.

All incoming international flights to India will be banned for one week starting Sunday, the government said yesterday as it announced the latest raft of measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Ahead of a national address by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the government said in a statement that "no scheduled international commercial passenger aircraft shall be allowed to land in India from March 22".

All citizens above 65 and children under 10 were advised to "remain at home".

States were also directed by the national government to enforce work from home policies in the private sector, apart from those in emergency or essential services. Some government employees are set to stagger their shifts and alternate working in the office.

New Delhi has already suspended the visas of all incoming tourists and barred passengers of flights from the European Union, the European



**SRINAGAR:** Soldiers patrol along an alleyway with closed shops following restrictions imposed as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Srinagar yesterday. —AFP

Free Trade Association, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

Travellers from several countries are also subject to a 14-day quarantine when they arrive in India.

Most schools and entertainment facilities, including cinemas, have already been closed across India, the world's second-most populous country

with 1.3 billion people.

The Taj Mahal and other monuments have been closed to visitors. The government says there have been 173 positive cases and four deaths from the virus. Lav Agarwal, joint secretary at the health ministry, said yesterday there was "no community transmission of the virus in the country". —Agencies

## Four Delhi bus gang-rapists to hang today

**NEW DELHI:** Four men convicted of the 2012 gang-rape and murder of a New Delhi student will be executed today, the victim's lawyer said after a court dismissed a final last-minute petition to delay the hangings. The brutal attack on Jyoti Singh aboard a city bus sparked nationwide demonstrations and shone a spotlight on the alarming rates of sexual violence in India.

A trial court in Delhi, which had already postponed the hangings three times, on Thursday dismissed another plea to delay the executions scheduled for 5:30 am (0000 GMT) today. "The court rejected their petition and said they have exhausted all their legal rights. The hangings will take place on Friday at the scheduled time," Singh's lawyer Seema Kushwaha told reporters. Singh's mother Asha Devi welcomed the ruling and said her "daughter's soul will finally rest in peace".

The convicts had filed numerous petitions seeking delays to the executions. One challenged the rejection of his mercy plea by the president, the last remedy available to death-row convicts in India.



**The Four men convicted of the 2012 gang-rape and murder of a New Delhi student.**

The Supreme Court said it found no reason to interfere with the president's decision and rejected his petition. Yesterday's ruling came amid widespread support for the executions. The media has also been full of grisly details about the hangings, including that the nooses will be smeared with banana and clarified butter to soften them. Singh, 23, was returning home from the cinema in the evening with a friend when they boarded a bus, thinking it would take them home.

The five men and one juvenile knocked the friend unconscious and dragged Singh to the back of the bus and raped and tortured her with a metal rod. The physiotherapy student and the friend were then dumped on the road. Singh died 13 days later in a Singapore hospital from massive internal injuries. —AFP

## India's biggest airline cut employee pay

**NEW DELHI:** India's biggest airline IndiGo has cut the salaries of most employees by between 5 percent and 20 percent in response to the coronavirus outbreak, which has paralyzed air travel and dented its revenues, an internal memo seen by Reuters said. In the letter to its employees, IndiGo CEO Ronojoy Dutta said the virus' impact on the aviation sector has been particularly severe and the company must reduce costs in line with the fall in revenues.

"With the precipitous drop in revenues, the very survival of the airline industry is now at stake. We have to pay careful attention to our cash flow so that we do not run out of cash," Dutta said. He said he would take a 25 percent pay cut from April 1. In-

diGo did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

The coronavirus has infected more than 218,900 people and caused some 8,900 deaths across the world, triggering emergency lockdowns and injections of cash not seen since World War II. In India more than 165 people have been infected and three have died.

India is planning a rescue package of up to \$1.6 billion for the aviation sector, which is likely to include a temporary suspension of taxes. Dutta said global travel restrictions have resulted in a virtual shutdown of its international flights. Domestic bookings are also around 20 percent lower, with the situation likely to worsen before it improves.

Indian budget carrier GoAir has asked some staff to take leave without pay on a rotational basis to help it deal with the reduction in capacity. Vistara, a joint venture between Singapore Airlines and India's Tata Group, said earlier this week it has not considered sending employees on forced or unpaid leave. —Reuters

## International

# Wealthy flock to private jets as pandemic spreads, airlines tank

## Fears of bankruptcies, calls for emergency bailouts sweep global carriers

**HONG KONG:** With commercial airlines engulfed by the maelstrom of the coronavirus pandemic one sector of the industry favored by the wealthy is thriving: private jets. Fears of massive bankruptcies and calls for emergency bailouts have swept global carriers in recent days with one top US official warning that the outbreak threatens the industry even more than the September 11 attacks.

But for Richard Zaher, CEO of a US-based private jet charter company, the emails and phone calls just keep coming. "Inquiries have gone through the roof," he told AFP, noting his company Paramount Business Jets had seen a 400 percent increase in queries, with bookings up roughly 20-25 percent.

"It is completely coronavirus," he added. "We are seeing our regular private jet clients flying as they normally do. However, we have this surge of clients coming our way and the majority of them have never flown private." Across the world airlines have been slashing capacity and passengers cancelling travel plans as countries block arrivals to stem the spread of COVID-19.

ForwardKeys, a travel analytics company, estimates as many as 3.3 million seats on transat-

lantic flights alone are disappearing. Zaher said many new bookings were from clients who had emergencies and either could not find seats on commercial routes or did not want to risk them.

One recent booking involved a woman who flew her elderly mother across the United States.

"Her mum was on oxygen and needed to be flown coast to coast," Zaher said.

"They felt it was necessary to pay a premium in order to avoid flying commercial and to be together during this uncertain time."

### Customs without the crowds

Costs vary hugely depending on the aircraft, region, number of passengers and duration of the flight. A round-trip charter on a 12-seater plane from London to New York can be around \$150,000. Hong Kong to Japan costs around \$71,000 one-way. But booking a private flight from the UK to the south of France can set you back just over \$10,000.

In Asia, where the outbreak originated, charter companies said the past two months had seen a sustained increase in new customers, as people who fled the virus in January returned in March from places now experiencing their own epi-



Demand for private jets is soaring as the coronavirus pandemic spreads. — File photo

demics. Commercial flights to and from China have dropped by around 90 percent in the past two months. A spokeswoman for Air Charter Service in Hong Kong told AFP they had seen a 70 percent

increase in fixed bookings from the financial hub, Shanghai, and Beijing in January and February, and had recorded a 170 percent jump in new customers during the same period. —AFP

## Indonesia orders more virus tests as deaths climb

**JAKARTA:** Faced by a rising death toll from coronavirus and a big jump in infections, Indonesia's president yesterday called for testing to be stepped up immediately in the world's fourth most populous country. Less than three weeks since the country of more than 260 million people announced its first case of the virus, its death toll had reached 25 - higher than in any other Southeast Asian country.

The number of infections in Indonesia jumped by 82 to 309, which together with daily rises of 110 in Malaysia and 60 in Thailand sent the number of reported infections across Southeast Asia to well over 2,200 - up more than 15 percent in one day.

"I ask that the number of testing kits and the number of test centers are increased and we get more hospitals involved," President Joko Widodo said. The presidential palace said both he and his wife had tested negative for COVID-19.

Indonesia has faced criticism from medical workers for a slow start to testing that might have more quickly revealed the scale



SURABAYA: People stand on designated areas to ensure social distancing inside an elevator at a shopping mall in Surabaya yesterday amid concerns of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. — AFP

of the problem in an archipelago that spans a distance wider than the continental United States. The head of Indonesia's Red Cross told Reuters the number of infections was likely far higher than reported.

"If the tests are low, then the cases are low," said Jusuf Kalla, a former vice president. Indonesia had carried out only 1,592 tests as of Thursday - only a few hundred more than Cambodia despite having over 16 times as many people and being far wealthier.

South Korea, which has been praised for testing that has helped to stem its outbreak, has been carrying out an average of more tests every two hours than Indonesia has done in total. It has carried out over 290,000 tests. A health ministry official said nearly all of the dead in Indonesia had other

medical conditions, such as diabetes, high blood pressure or chronic heart problems. The youngest's age was given as 37.

In a measure to curb the spread of the virus, the capital Jakarta will suspend all religious gatherings for two weeks, the governor said. Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country.

A rally of Muslim pilgrims that had already drawn thousands of people to the South Sulawesi province was cancelled under pressure from local authorities after a similar event in Malaysia led to hundreds of infections. After stating "we are more afraid of God" than the coronavirus on Wednesday, organizer Mustari Bahrannuddin said he would cancel the rally, but it would be hard for pilgrims to leave quickly. — Reuters

## Muslim event in Indonesia stopped

**JAKARTA:** A rally of Muslim pilgrims that is drawing thousands of people to Indonesia has been stopped amid fears that it could help spread the new coronavirus, an official said.

But elsewhere in Indonesia, a Christian gathering went ahead with more than 1,000 people despite official discouragement of big religious meetings. The world's most populous Muslim-majority country has reported less than 300 coronavirus cases but there are suspicions many have gone undetected and medical workers have accused the government of a "half-hearted" response.

For days, authorities had been trying to persuade Ijtima Asia, part of the global Tablighi Jama'at movement of evangelical Muslims, to halt the event at Gowa near the city of Makassar in South Sulawesi province after a similar event in Malaysia led to hundreds of infections.

"Alhamdulillah (Praise be to God), Ijtima finally agreed to postpone/cancel," the head of Gowa regency, Adnan Purichta Ichsan, posted on social media late on Wednesday. The pilgrims already there would be isolated while they make arrangements to leave Gowa, he added. More than 8,500 people from across Indonesia, Asia and the Middle East had converged on the area.

After resisting the closure of the event and defiantly stating "we are more afraid of God" than the coronavirus on Wednesday, organizer Mustari Bahrannuddin said he would follow the directive to cancel the prayer rally. But he said it would be difficult to quickly disperse the crowd, many of whom had arrived by ferry. — Reuters

# Lifestyle

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Sign o'the times: K-pop idol emerges from decades past

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Weinstein transferred to New York state prison

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## Lifestyle | Music &amp; Movies

## Weinstein transferred to New York state prison

Fallen film producer Harvey Weinstein, sentenced to 23 years in prison for rape and sexual assault, was being transferred to a jail in northern New York state Wednesday. Weinstein, who turns 68 yesterday, has stayed at New York's Rikers Island prison and a Manhattan hospital, where he was treated for chest pains, since his sentencing on March 11. The state's department of corrections said he had been transferred into its custody on Wednesday and that he had been assigned to the high-security Wende Correctional Facility. The prison is near Buffalo, 350 miles (560 kilometers) north-

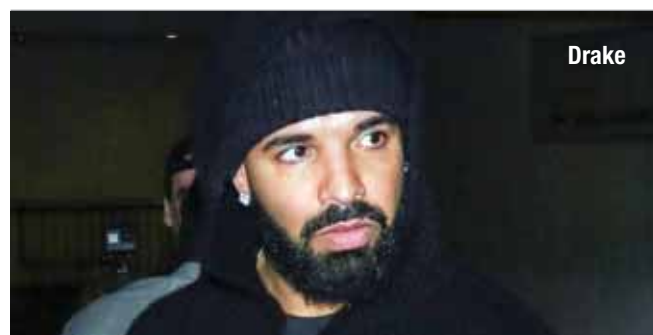
west of New York City.

Weinstein will be held there while his physical and mental needs are assessed before the department decides in which prison he will serve out his sentence. Weinstein's spokesman had earlier provided inaccurate information about which prison the ex-movie mogul was being taken to. Weinstein was convicted in February of a criminal sexual act in the first degree and rape in the third degree, while being cleared of predatory sexual assault charges.

He was convicted of raping ex-actress Jessica Mann in 2013 and of forcibly performing

oral sex on former production assistant Mimi Haley in 2006. Nearly 90 women, including Angelina Jolie and Salma Hayek, have leveled sexual misconduct allegations against Weinstein, the Oscar-winning producer of "Shakespeare in Love" and numerous other critical and box office hits.—AFP

In this file photo Harvey Weinstein arrives at the Manhattan Criminal Court in New York City.—AFP



Drake

## Drake self-isolate amid the coronavirus crisis

Drake has put himself into isolation amid the coronavirus crisis. The 'God's Plan' hitmaker has decided to spend the foreseeable future in quarantine at his home in Toronto after Nets star Kevin Durant was diagnosed with the deadly illness the just days after he partied with him at Nice Guy in Hollywood. According to the New York Post newspaper, the basketball team were in Los Angeles, California, to play the Lakers and, although Kevin didn't play as he's recovering from a torn tendon, he still managed to party with his teammates. Taking to his Instagram account, the 33-year-old rapper reportedly uploaded a video, which has since been removed, of his home basketball court.

He captioned the clip: "My life for the next however long." His decision to isolate comes days after Idris Elba revealed he has tested positive for coronavirus, which has already infected over 200,000 people worldwide. He said: "This morning I tested positive for Covid 19. 'I feel ok, I have no symptoms so far but have been isolated since I found out about my possible exposure to the virus. Stay home people and be pragmatic. I will keep you updated on how I'm doing ... No panic. (sic)" Bond star Olga Kurylenko - who is best known for starring in 'Quantum of Solace' in 2008 - announced on social media that she has also tested positive for the illness after suffering from the common symptoms: fever and fatigue.

Alongside an image of a window inside her house, Olga wrote: "Locked up at home after having tested positive for Coronavirus. 'I've actually been ill for almost a week now. Fever and fatigue are my main symptoms. Take care of yourself and do take this seriously! (sic)" Fellow Hollywood star Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson have also been confirmed to have the virus, with the star recently revealing he is taking things "one-day-at-a-time" as they recover in Australia.—BangShowbiz

## 'THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA' GOES FOR DARING TRUMP PARALLEL

US author Philip Roth certainly could never have imagined Donald Trump's presidency when he wrote "The Plot Against America." But a new TV adaptation of his bleak 2004 novel, which envisions an alternate history of a fascist United States, certainly suggests a link between fantasy and the current political reality. David Simon, creator of the acclaimed drug-crime saga "The Wire," got the blessing of Roth — who died in 2018 — before launching into the six-episode HBO series. "If you read the novel, it's startling how allegorical it is to our political moment," Simon said in an interview with NPR.

"In some respects, using the past and trying to reference the past as allegory is your best shot for explaining what has happened to the American body politic right now." The show, which began airing late Monday, offers a giant "what if" — what if aviator hero (and known fascist sympathizer) Charles Lindbergh had defeated Franklin D Roosevelt in the 1940 US presidential election?

Alternate history has become a bit of a genre in the era of peak TV — other examples include the dystopian saga "The Man in the High Castle" and HBO's hit series "Watchmen." But unlike many other examples, "The Plot Against America" draws uncomfortably close parallels to real-life events. While Lindbergh was never a Republican White House hopeful, he was a national icon and the face of the America First Committee, an influential isolationist movement that had as many as 800,000 members advocating that the US stay out of World War II. The series even rehashes the most famous speech of the first pilot to fly solo across the Atlantic, in which he condemned Nazi aggression but accused Jews of wanting to drag America into the war. Little by little, the series depicts the tilt of American society towards fear, racism and violence.

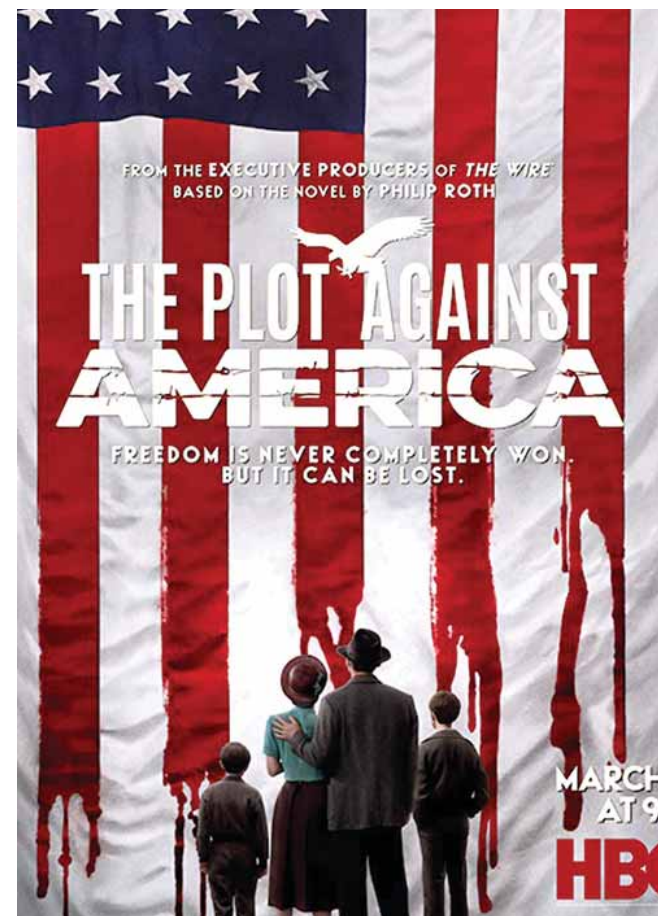
## 'Dry run at fascism'

Simon — who co-wrote the series with "Wire" collaborator Ed Burns — sets the tale, as Roth did, in the author's hometown of Newark, New Jersey, in the home of an ordinary Jewish family. By limiting the number of characters, the series stays on point and allows viewers to delve deeper into their motivations and personalities. "Roth's book is at its most powerful when it's examining what the members of this Jewish-American family... do when confronted by a dry run at fascism in their country," Simon told NPR. "Every one of them struggles with that question of, you know, where do you stand in an America that is transforming itself into something less than a republic?"

"And that's kind of where we're at" in present-day America, added Simon, a former Baltimore Sun reporter who has also worked on "Treme" and "The Deuce" for HBO. In 2013, Simon was approached to work on "Plot," but he said he declined at the time because he didn't think the country was "going that way." Barack

Obama was in the Oval Office, and Simon believed American society seemed to be evolving to be more inclusive, and putting to rest the specter of racism and segregation. "How wrong I was," he said.

Simon gathered an all-star cast to tell the story, including Winona Ryder as a woman engaged to a rabbi (John Turturro) who ends up working for Lindbergh and mistakenly believes he can use his influence to curb his anti-Semitic policies. "I think I'm fairly convinced not only that it can happen here, but that we are right now on a road where it will happen here," Simon said of the path towards demagoguery, slamming what he called Trump's "misrule." He added that it could happen "unless there is a sufficient level of awareness of how vulnerable we are and how fragile democracy actually is."—AFP



## Lifestyle | Music &amp; Movies

Sign o'the times: **K-pop idol** emerges from decades past

Thirty years ago his floppy hair, make-up, and flamboyant fashion sense outraged audiences, who threw stones at him as he performed on stage and threatened to beat him at shows. Today, 50-year-old Korean-American singer Yang Joon-il is enjoying an unlikely comeback, re-discovered by the YouTube and social media generation through online clips and hailed as a forerunner to today's K-pop stars. The K-pop industry is now estimated to generate \$5 billion a year and many of its male stars are celebrated at home and abroad for their gender fluidity, while Yang — who was once shunned for exactly that — is often compared to current idol G-Dragon, lead of hugely popular band BIGBANG.

working as an English teacher until he moved to the US in 2015. He struggled to make ends meet with a wife and toddler son to support and confesses to feeling suicidal until he secured a job as waiter in Florida, working 14 hours a day. Keung Yoon Bae, who researches film and media at Harvard, says Yang first emerged at a time when “an explosion of Korean pop had to co-exist with a still-conservative social climate”.

Within a few years of Yang's brief moment in the spotlight, emerging stars including Seo Taeji and Boys, a band considered as innovators who marked the start of modern K-pop, were laying the ground for its expansion to global popularity, now epitomized by septet BTS. “I didn't really think I was ahead of my time,” Yang insists. But University of California, Berkeley sociology professor John Lie disagrees, calling him a “pioneering public figure of non-macho, almost gender-bending presentation of self”.

**'Nostalgia for the past'**

Yang's big break came three decades after he first began performing. In 2018 South Korean television stations started streaming long-archived pop TV shows on YouTube, and millennials — many not even born when he made his debut — discovered him. Word spread until it was picked up by mainstream media, and in December he made his comeback television appearance, pulling off his signature New Jack Swing-inspired dance steps. The singer's rise to fame comes at a time when intergenerational conflict is mounting in South Korea.

Citizens now in their 50s and 60s worked for and benefitted from rapid economic growth and value endurance and conformity, but many Koreans in their 20s and 30s refer to themselves as members of the Sampo, or “three sacrifice”, generation — forced to give up marriages, relationships and children in the face of intense job competition and expensive housing in the country's cut-throat economy. “Before discovering Yang, I'd never met anyone in their 50s who made me think, ‘Wow, that person is cool, that's how I want to be like 20 or 30 years from now,’” said Lee Young-jun, a 35-year-old YouTuber who creates fan content about Yang. “But Yang is different.” Tamar Herman, a K-pop correspondent for Billboard, says fans are looking “nostalgically at the past”. Bringing “hidden gems” like him to light, she added, “gives audiences a sense that they can change the past at a time when changing the present is hard”.—AFP

**'Pioneering, gender-bending'**

Yang made a few appearances on the nation's top pop television shows — displaying moves that would not be out of place in a K-pop video today — but struggled to find mainstream appeal as many found his approach too “effeminate” and “foreign”. “I just felt that Korea and I were incompatible,” Yang says, adding: “The audience felt very distant, so whenever I performed I just avoided looking at them.” Once, he recalled, an audience member faked a handshake to pull him violently down to the ground from the stage, telling him: “You need a beating.” Fans remember being ridiculed for supporting him.

“At karaoke bars, people would just turn off the machine when his music played,” said Yi Duk-jin. “People said he was too weird, too strange. He spoke English, wore earrings and had long hair despite being a man.” Yang quickly faded into obscurity,



Amanda Bynes

## Amanda Bynes getting 'mental health' help

Amanda Bynes is receiving “mental health” treatment. The 33-year actress set tongues wagging earlier this week when she implied on Instagram that she was pregnant with her first child - before later deleting the post - and her lawyer has now asked fans not to “speculate” on her personal life while she focuses on “getting better”. Amanda's lawyer David Esquibias told PEOPLE: “Any reports that Amanda is suffering from drug or alcohol addiction issues are completely false. We ask for privacy during this time, and for any speculation about her personal life from the public and the media to cease so Amanda can focus on getting better.”

The former Nickelodeon star sparked speculation that she was with child on Tuesday (17.03.20) when she uploaded an ultrasound photo bearing her name and yesterday's date on it, on her social networking sites. She captioned the image: “Baby on board!” Her on/off boyfriend, Paul Michael, also shared a slideshow of pictures on his Instagram account, including a selfie of himself and Amanda and also a similar ultrasound photo with the ‘She's the Man’ star's name on it.

He captioned the post, which has been removed: “Baby in the making.” Amanda recently got engaged to Paul following a whirlwind romance - but they won't be able to tie the knot anytime soon, as Amanda's mother Lynn is her conservator and she doesn't approve of their engagement. The couple - who first met around two months ago - got engaged on Valentine's Day, and they shared their happy news on Instagram. Amanda posted an image of her sparkling diamond ring on the photo-sharing platform and captioned it: “Engaged to tha love of my life. (sic)”

However, Amanda - who has struggled with substance abuse in the past - cannot legally get married without the permission of the judge in her conservatorship case, as well as her mother Lynn. Explaining how the process works, Neama Rahmani, the president of West Coast Trial Lawyers, recently said: “As Amanda's conservator, her mother has responsibility over her daughter's decision-making, including whether or not to allow her to marry. If Amanda's parents did not consent to the marriage, they can petition the court to annul the marriage on the basis of Amanda's ‘unsound mind.’” The actress - who graduated from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in June 2019 - is believed to be currently residing in a sober living house.—BangShowbiz



This picture shows K-pop singer Yang Joon-il performing during a recording session for a television channel music show in Seoul. —AFP photos



This picture shows K-pop singer Yang Joon-il performing during a recording session for a television channel music show.

# Ghost Recon Breakpoint's 'immersive' mode coming this month

Ubisoft are releasing the 'Ghost Recon Breakpoint' "immersive" mode later this month. Last week, the studio announced the mysterious upcoming feature - initially due to be released in February - was being delayed, but gamers won't have to wait long with the mode launching in PlayStation 4, Xbox One and PC on March 24. In a blog post, the team revealed: "On March 24, the Ghost Experience is coming to 'Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Breakpoint'. "Pick one of our pre-selected settings or modify parameters to create the unique experience you want.

"The Ghost Experience has been a complex undertaking to implement into the game, but one we feel is critical to address many of the top concerns raised by our community via online feedback and the Community Survey." Responding to criticism levied at the game when it launched last year, players will now have a choice of tak-

ing on the title the way it was released, or a new "immersive" version which offer new tactical options and removes "gear level and tiered loot entirely".

Going a step further, players can also set up their own "custom experience", changing up everything from primary weapon quantity, realistic looting and ammo loss on reload, to stamina level, risk of injury and health regen. The blog post added: "Once you select your mode or settings, you can change them at any time. Feel free to experiment with different options to create your perfect mode." And the team clarified: "Settings selected through the custom mode will not be shared with co-op teammates. "Just like when selecting your difficulty, your choices are session-specific meaning they will apply only to you. "No matter which options you pick, you can play with your friends regardless of their own selections." —Bang Showbiz



Ghost Recon Breakpoint

## PUBG asks gamers to help shape competitive mode



PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

PUBG Corp. wants gamers to help shape 'PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds' upcoming competitive mode. The developer has called on the hugely popular title's players to have their say in a new test as they look to shape the way the feature will be introduced. In a Twitter post, the team revealed: "Ranked Ruleset is now live in LABS for a limited time. "Bring out your competitive side with the heart-pounding intensity of the Ranked Ruleset. "Feedback from this test will help us determine the ruleset for our upcoming Competitive Mode." The test ran until 7am on March 9, with the developer keen to hear what fans had to say.

They added in a blog post: "One of the most important elements of Battle Royale is



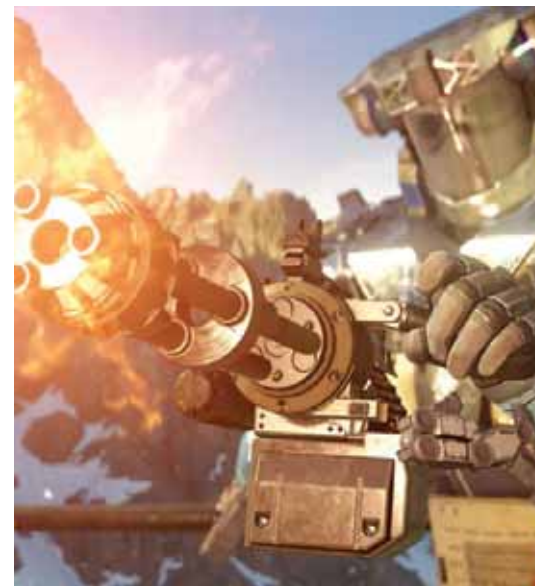
Fortnite

survival, and being the last survivor standing means growing through experience. "However, many of you have stated that 'PUBG' also needs to promote the fierce competition between players as they play and win games, and a ruleset to amplify that competitive spirit. For those players, we're happy to introduce the Ranked Ruleset. "A ruleset like this needs feedback though, so like our previous skill-based rating test, we're looking to PUBG LABS to gather your feedback as quickly and efficiently as possible. "During this LABS test, we'll be analyzing the data and your feedback to better understand what our players are enjoying and will adjust the ruleset accordingly before we take it live."

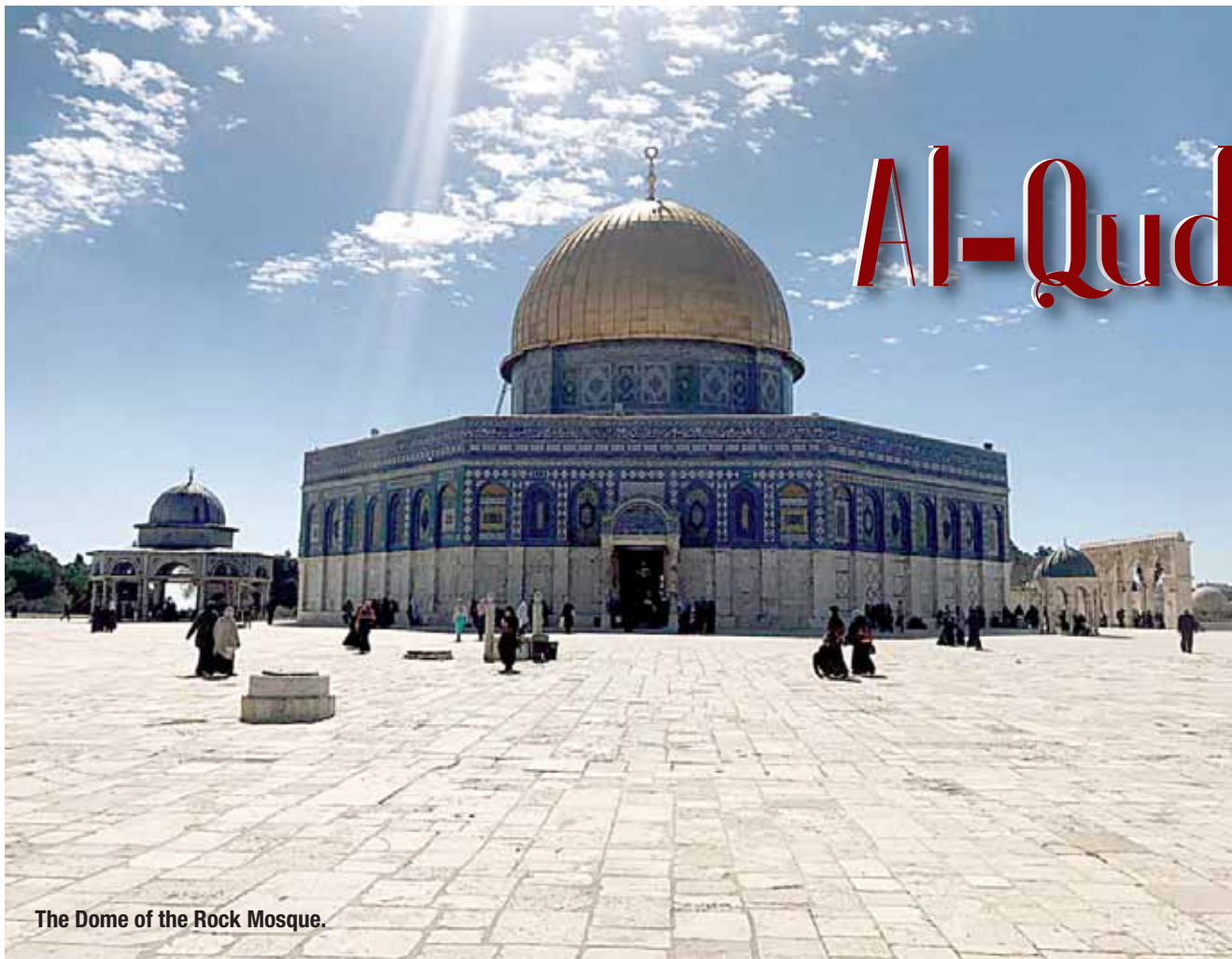
## Call of Duty: Warzone launches after leak

Activision has launched the 'Call of Duty' battle royal experience. The developer revealed details of the Warzone mode - which was prematurely leaked on YouTube by accident on Monday (09.03.20) - and confirmed the release will be "free for everyone", meaning you don't need 'Modern Warfare' to download or play the new feature. In a blog post, the studio revealed: "At launch, players can squad up in trios with their friends on Playstation 4, Battle.net for PC, or Xbox One across two game modes: Battle Royale and Plunder. "In Battle Royale, fight to be the last squad standing while escaping the deadly gas in the swiftly closing circle with up to 150 players. "In Plunder, the race is on to collect the most in-match Cash by looting across the map, taking down enemies to steal their Cash, and completing in-match Contracts."

Activision explained: "Call of Duty: Warzone shares Call of Duty: Modern Warfare's cross-play and unified progression. For players that already own the full version of Modern Warfare, all content already earned including Battle Pass items, Operators, weapons and customization items will carry over to Warzone, and all progression earned in Warzone will count toward overall Modern Warfare progression. "For players who do not own the full version of Modern Warfare, all progress and items they've earned in Warzone will be rewarded across Multiplayer and Special Ops in Modern Warfare, should they ever choose to purchase it."



Call of Duty



The Dome of the Rock Mosque.

# Al-Quds faces attempts of Judaization



The Dome of the Rock Mosque.

**A**l-Quds Compound, known as the Nobel Sanctuary or Temple Mount, with all its components of mosques, minarets, domes, and doors, reflects the historical identity of Jerusalem. Since 1967, the important historical milestone witnessed many attempts of Judaization and systematic

tampering by the Israeli occupation forces aiming to establish the alleged “structure” through the ongoing excavation works under the foundations of the mosque.

The Jerusalemites confront almost daily incursions by settlers protected by Israeli police forces, which caused

Israel to impose many penalties on Palestinians including arrest, deportation and assault. The old city is surrounded by a wall with several gates that were ruined several times until Sultan Suleiman ordered rebuilding it. —KUNA



An old market in Jerusalem.



The Dome of the Rock Mosque from inside.



A Palestinian woman peasant selling her products.

# THE TOP 9 TRAVEL ESSENTIALS FOR YOUR PET



The proper carrier can make all the difference.

By Maya Stanton

Even as governmental regulations fluctuate around which service and emotional support animals are cleared to fly, traveling with pets is becoming more and more commonplace, with accommodations, restaurants and parks allowing access to man's best friend - and even tailoring their experiences accordingly. While it can be fun to have a furry companion along for the ride, loud crowds and unfamiliar spaces like airports, train stations, and hotels can be distressing for sensitive critters, so we've rounded up a few items to make your journey as smooth as possible. From cat harnesses and dog socks to GPS trackers and anxiety jackets, these are the goods to get you to your final destination - and let you enjoy the journey too.

Our writers independently select the best products to help you have amazing travel experiences.

## 1. Wild One air travel carrier

If you're taking to the skies with a small pup or cat in tow, the proper carrier can make all the difference. Wild One's version is ideal for animals up to 16 pounds, with mesh walls for breathability, a shoulder strap that doubles as a leash, and a padded interior that folds out to serve as a bed. Most important, it's airline compliant, sized to fit underneath a standard economy-class seat, and comes with that all-important sleeve that slides over your suitcase handle for ease of carry. Air travel carrier, \$125.

## 2. Spruce dog bed

For road trips and train travel, you can afford to pack those items that make your canine companion feel at home - even if they take up a bit more room. Not only is Spruce's portable bed extra cozy, with memory-foam padding, side bolsters, and removable, washable, waterproof sheets, it also folds up to hold all of your dog's accoutrements, from toys and food to leashes and bowls. Plus, it's made from the same materials as luggage designed for humans, so it'll withstand plenty of wear and tear. Spruce portable dog bed, from \$170.

## 3. Kitty Holster cat harness

On the whole, cats tend to be less well-traveled than dogs - it's just the nature of the beast. But if you leash-train your kitten, they'll be primed to join you on your adventures, as long as you have the proper equipment. Some harnesses go on over the head and secure with clips and adjustable straps, but for cats that have a tendency to slip out, Kitty Holster's lightweight model relies on Velcro closures to keep them locked in and a breathable cotton fabric to keep them from overheating. Kitty Holster cat harness, \$24.



A portable dog bed can make your canine companion feel at home.



## Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, March 20, 2020

**4. ThunderShirt anxiety jackets**

Some pets take to the open road like champs, while others need a little help to feel at ease. Much like swaddling can calm a fussy baby and weighted vests or blankets can chill out an anxiety-prone person, ThunderShirt's jackets apply mild, constant pressure to soothe the savage beast. A vet-approved, low-tech alternative to meds, they'll get your dog or cat into their carrier with minimal fuss and make their time in transit less stressful as well. ThunderShirt anxiety jackets for dogs and cats, from \$40.

**5. Whistle Go Explore GPS tracker**

There's little more gutting than losing a pet, especially when they take off in an unfamiliar place. Whistle's Go Explore tracker uses WiFi, cellular data and GPS to keep tabs on their whereabouts, and it's waterproof when submerged up to six feet, so an impromptu jump in a lake shouldn't put it out of commission. Plus, the battery holds a charge for 20 days, so if your cat or dog has been on the run for awhile, you should still be able to find them. Just a few caveats: because the device uses AT&T's cellular network, it does require a monthly subscription, and it won't work outside of the US or in areas without coverage. Go Explore GPS tracker, \$130 plus monthly subscription fees.

**6. Saltsox dog boots**

Dogs need protective footwear when streets and sidewalks are strewn with a wintery mix of snow and salt, but they also need it during those steamy summer months, because if it's too hot for you to be barefoot, it's also too hot for your dog. These boots from Saltsox will keep them covered year-round: with breathable mesh uppers and a built-in radiant heat barrier in the rubber sole, the Lavasox block out heat from pavement and sidewalks, while the eponymous winter version offers a thin, lightweight layer of defense against icy, salty walkways. Saltsox dog boots, from \$56.

**7. Billy Wolf Dash travel bowl**

Hydration is just as important for animals as it is for humans, and Billy Wolf's collapsible Dash bowl helps deliver their H<sub>2</sub>O no matter the setting. The flexible canvas construction allows it to fold down, snap closed and slip into tight spaces with ease, and it's suitable for dinner service as well, thanks to a waterproof

**Keep tabs on your pet with a GPS tracker.**

nylon lining and a food-safe paraffin wax exterior. It holds up to three cups of puppy chow at one go, and it's hand-washable, so no worries about toting around any crumbs between meals. Dash travel bowl, \$32.

**8. Cycle Dog dog-waste pickup bags**

Cleaning up your pup's messes isn't the most glamorous part of pet parenthood, but it's an essential one nonetheless. To keep things sustainable, look for an option like Cycle Dog's biodegradable waste pickup bags - made from corn- and plant-based materials, they'll break down in 10 to 45 days when buried or composted in a controlled environment, but you can also dispose of them via your local composting service if it handles pet waste. Dog-waste pickup bags, \$6.

**9. DryFur pet carrier insert pads**

The US Department of Transportation advises against feeding your pets solid food in the six hours prior to a flight, instead recommending a moderate amount of water and a walk before and after boarding - but accidents happen, even if you've taken every precaution. DryFur's absorbent travel pads dry quickly, wicking away moisture, with a rigid core that keeps them from shifting and bunching under foot, and they fit most soft carrier bags and some hard-sided kennels too. DryFur pet carrier insert pads, \$28 for two. —www.lonelyplanet.com

**An anxiety jacket can help a jittery pup relax.****Dogs' feet need protection year round.****Hydration is just as important for animals as it is for humans.**

# Exploring *Punta Gallinas*, Colombia's untouched Caribbean desert



Taroa Dunes is a spectacular spot for drone photography.  
— Elizabeth Thorn

By Elizabeth Thorn

An arduous two-day journey into the desert of La Guajira will take you deep into the unknown, into the remote territory that characterizes Colombia's remote northern coastline. Silent stretches of sand extend for miles and miles until they spill out onto the Caribbean coastline, eventually carrying you all the way to Punta Gallinas, the northernmost tip of South America.

Roll down sand dunes and into the waves at secluded Caribbean beaches before enjoying magical sunsets that eventually turn into evening performances of light under star-drenched skies. Getting to Punta Gallinas isn't easy, but it's well worth the trip.

**La Guajira and Wayuu culture**

La Guajira is one of Colombia's 32 very diverse departments and is known for its giant sand dunes, tiny remote fishing villages and the Wayuu indigenous people who live there. Modern media often associates the Wayuu with the colorful woven bags they produce. These bags are not only a part of the local tradition here but also an expression of life itself, and they're one of the only ways in which locals can earn a living aside from breeding livestock.

Because it is so remote, you won't find any local shops where you can purchase food or water. You'll find a few locals selling water and other drinks at some of the most visited stops, but it's best to stock up on water before you head out into the desert. With an average daily temperature of 91° F (32.7° C) and a UV index of 6, it's easy to get dehydrated fast here.

**How to get to Punta Gallinas**

To get to Punta Gallinas, you're going to have to start your journey in Riohacha. Getting to Riohacha is easy by bus if you leave from large coastal cities such as Santa Marta, Cartagena or Barranquilla. Once there, you'll find that you have two options: you can either make your way to the tiny town of Uribia by bus alone and hire a guide from there; or you can hire a guide in Riohacha. The latter is much easier, and it'll cost you about the same.

**The Wayuu indigenous people supplement their income by making brightly colored woven bags.** — Getty Images



It's possible to hire a guide in Uribia or Riohacha to take you to Punta Gallinas.  
— Getty Images



## Lifestyle | Travel

Once you arrive in Riohacha, you'll notice a lot of individual tour companies along the sidewalks offering tours in a 4WD to Cabo de la Vela, Punta Gallinas, or both. There's only really a day's difference between the two and, since you're already there, it's definitely worth making the trek all the way to Punta Gallinas.



**The view from Pilon de Azucar, en route to Punta Gallinas, is dazzling.**  
—Elizabeth Thorn

While suitable for solo travelers, you might find that it works out more cost-effective if you travel with friends. If you're traveling with a small group of people, you can expect to pay around COP\$300,000 (US\$100) each for the roundtrip journey from Riohacha to Punta Gallinas. This includes meals as well as two nights' accommodation in a hammock.

#### Day one: Arriving in Cabo de La Vela

From Riohacha you'll set out towards Cabo de la Vela, and experience adrenaline-pumping moments of racing through the desert sand in search of cooling, crashing waves at Playa del Pilon and Ojo de Agua. These are the two most iconic

beaches in Cabo de la Vela, where orange-hued sand gets carried away and into the sea by the high winds. Pass the iguanas and dive in with the seagulls as you wash off your first day of exploring.

After a quick dip in the Caribbean waters, hike up to the sacred hill of Pilon de Azucar. You'll be rewarded with 360-degree views of sand and sea, along with a unique look at the statue erected here of La Virgen de Fatima. Stay for sunset, where things turn cinematic as soon as the sun begins to dip below the horizon.

After a fun-filled day of more than one salty sea bath, you'll head to your accommodation, which is likely a makeshift shack with hammocks strung across the ceiling. Enjoy dinner and then let the sound of nothingness lull you asleep under the warm breeze and a fantastic display of stars.

#### Day two: Exploring Punta Gallinas

Dawn awakens adventurers early in Cabo de la Vela. Pack up the hammock, eat a light breakfast and then prepare to load up the 4WD for another day of desert driving. The entryway to Punta Gallinas is Bahia Hondita, a tiny bay known for its burnt-orange cliffs, desert fauna and sweeping views of the Caribbean Sea. Speed out on a tiny boat in order to get up close and personal with wild flamingos, or stick close to the shore and roll down sand dunes.

At up to 60m high, the Taroa Dunes tower over the rest of the landscape. Currently, flying a drone in Colombia is legal, and if you're after some stunning shots of sand and sea, this is the place to get them. Then, head straight for the lighthouse, which is the symbolic point of the northernmost tip of South America. It's the perfect spot for a photo op to commemorate your journey.



Seeing as there's not much else to do once you've made it this far, you'll be left to enjoy a sunset that's likely just as magical as the adventure you've just been on. Settle in with a Polar or Aguila, both local beers, and watch as the Colombian sky paints a picture you'll never forget. Snap a few photos, delight in the moment, and then retire to your hammock for a second night under a star-splashed sky.

The next morning, you'll spend the entire day racing through the bumpy desert as you make your way back to Riohacha. It's the perfect way to end a unique adventure, which is as much about the journey as the destination. Wrap a bandana around your face, stick your head out the window and let the wind help carry you on to your next Colombian adventure.

—www.lonelyplanet.com

**Accommodation is basic, but a hammock is all you need after an evening of star gazing.**  
—Elizabeth Thorn



Punta Gallinas

Comic

Daily SuDoku

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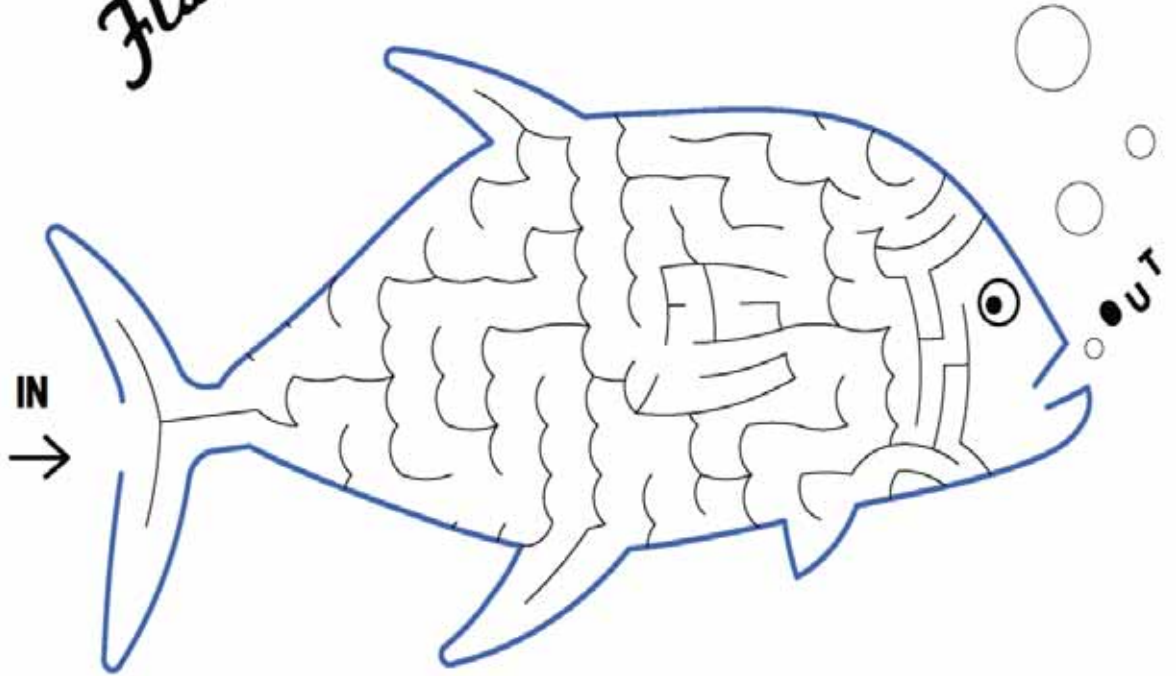
medium

Yesterday's Solution

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

very hard

Fishy tail maze



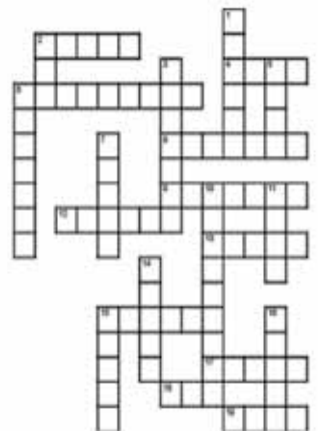
BODIES OF WATER Crossword

ACROSS

- 2. A wide inlet of the sea that is parallel to the coastline.
- 4. A deep inlet of the sea almost surrounded by land.
- 6. A cascade of water on a river.
- 8. A length of water wider than a strait, joining two large areas of water.
- 9. The mouth of a large river, where the tide meets the river.
- 12. A place on the coast where vessels may find shelter.
- 13. A small arm of the sea, lake or river.
- 15. A narrow passage of water connecting two large areas of water.
- 17. A large natural stream of water.
- 18. A broad inlet of the sea where the land curves inward.
- 19. A small body of still water.

DOWN

- 1. Shallow body of water located alongside a coast
- 2. A large body of salty water that may be connected to an ocean or completely surrounded by land.
- 3. A slowly moving river of ice.
- 5. A large body of water surrounded by land on all sides.
- 6. Land consisting of marshes or swamps.
- 7. A long, narrow and deep inlet of the sea between high cliffs.
- 10. A stream or river that flows into a larger river.
- 11. A ridge of rock, coral or sand near the surface of the sea.
- 14. Low-lying land that is flooded in wet seasons or high tide and always remains waterlogged
- 15. Freshwater wetland that has many trees and shrubs growing in it.
- 16. Large body of salt water that surrounds a continent.



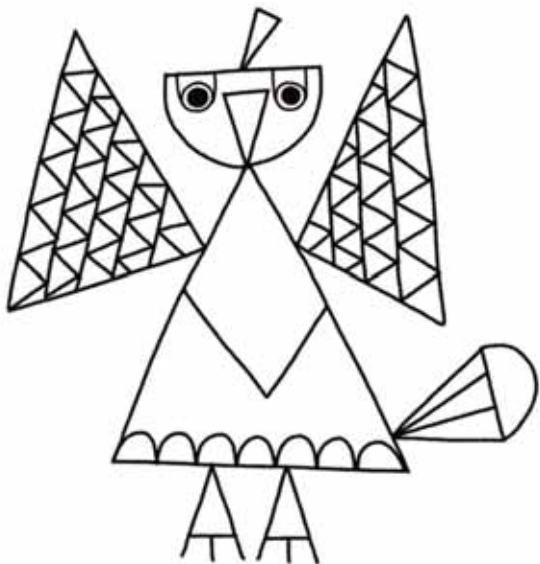
Cinderella Word Search

G	L	R	U	V	S	T	E	P	M	O	T	H	E	R
A	O	C	E	N	S	E	V	I	J	R	U	G	Y	R
V	E	D	E	P	C	A	D	T	X	I	F	X	H	P
Q	A	C	M	N	P	N	Q	X	Y	I	I	H	J	H
T	I	R	A	O	I	I	P	S	B	Y	N	C	P	P
M	E	D	A	G	T	N	L	E	C	I	G	A	M	X
G	C	R	H	G	H	H	B	S	L	Y	R	I	A	F
D	N	T	Z	L	S	S	E	N	J	T	V	W	V	H
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C	I	N	D	E	R	E	L	L	A	Z	P	L	W	E
P	D	K	R	K	F	I	A	C	B	K	L	O	A	S
N	D	J	Z	U	T	N	H	W	I	A	G	V	N	I
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BALL  
CASTLE  
CHARMING  
CINDERELLA  
COACH  
DANCE  
FAIRY

GODMOTHER  
GOWN  
MAGIC  
MICE  
MIDNIGHT  
PRINCE  
PUMPKIN

RAGS  
SLIPPER  
STEPMOTHER  
STEPSISTERS  
WAND



## Stars

### STAR TRACK



#### Aries (March 21-April 19)

Visitors could come to your home tonight, Aries, possibly for an informal get-together of some kind. Dear friends might be involved in some way. You're likely to be very busy during the day, perhaps tying up loose ends. Your mind is probably going a thousand miles an hour, so you'll need to wind down before going to bed tonight. You don't want to lose any sleep.



#### Taurus (April 20-May 20)

You may appear to have your head in the clouds today, Taurus. The truth is, you've got a lot of important things on your mind. Others might be offended or even amused at your distance. Try not to worry about this too much. You need to take care of resolving those problems you've been ruminating on before worrying about everyone else's reaction.



#### Gemini (May 21-June 20)

You might feel that money is flowing out of your bank account all too quickly lately, and this might be a cause of worry for you. You could feel you've spent too much on decorations for your home or on entertaining family and friends. Don't worry! You'll make up for it, and besides, you can't take it with you, you know. Watch your spending, Gemini, but don't turn into a miser.



#### Cancer (June 21-July 22)

This will be a good day for you, Cancer. You should be feeling happy, excited, enthusiastic, and optimistic about the future. Relations with family, friends, and neighbors are likely to be warm and congenial. Today could involve a lot of time on the phone or out running errands. Expect a surprise encounter with someone you haven't seen in a long time. You'll spend some time reminiscing and catching up.



#### Leo (July 23-August 22)

A rush of humanitarian spirit and a desire to do some real good might find you looking into various charities in order to find those you might want to help. However, money could be flowing out for other purposes a bit too quickly for your tastes, Leo. It perhaps would be best to find one group that suits you and give only to that one. Save other worthy causes for another time.



#### Virgo (August 23-September 22)

You, along with a significant other in your life, could be very busy trying to make time to see each other today, Virgo. Later, when you're finally alone, your phone could be ringing nonstop, further intruding upon your time together. Don't be afraid to turn it off! If a call is particularly important, they'll call again later.



#### Libra (September 23-October 22)

Today you could be faced with a bunch of people from out of town that you've never met before. You're likely to find this exciting and stimulating, but you could also feel a bit flustered. You might also not be at your most outgoing right now. This could be a better day to listen than to try to talk. Sometimes that impresses people more than anything you might say, Libra.



#### Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

Travel and adventure are on your mind. You could be daydreaming about flying to exotic places and doing unusual things, such as touring the ancient sights of India or going on safari in Kenya. Such dreams are possible, Scorpio, so you might want to look into it. You also might want to learn about exciting fields of interest, so this is a good day to sign up for a class or workshop.



#### Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

It may not be easy for you to convince someone today. No matter how profound your idea or how convincing your explanations, the other person just isn't ready to believe it yet. Don't be pushy. Maybe this person needs to sleep on it for a couple of nights, or maybe they just need to do their own research. Be patient and focus on other things in the meantime!



#### Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

A trip by air could be very much on your mind today. Perhaps you're planning a vacation with your family or a romantic partner. You could well be caught up in the excitement that seems to be the driving emotion today. Friends could offer advice, Capricorn, but you aren't in the space to accept it, as your self-confidence is high. Expect to spend the evening in the congenial company of friends.



#### Aquarius (January 20-February 18)

You've got a lot on your mind right now, Aquarius, and others might be interpreting your quiet behavior as your being aloof. Go right ahead and let them think whatever they want. You've got some real issues to think through, and decisions with important consequences to come up with. You'll be able to smooth their ruffled feathers later. Right now, just focus on taking care of yourself.



#### Pisces (February 19-March 20)

A number of invitations to social events could come your way today, some from people you really don't know well. Don't pass them up, however. You could make some fortunate contacts or even some new friends at these parties. You enjoy being around people, Pisces, but today you might find it a bit tedious. Your heart is with your family. You're probably looking forward to being at home and cuddling with a romantic partner.

### Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
Antigua	001268	Japan	0081
Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
Armenia	00374	Kazakhstan	007
Australia	0061	Kenya	00254
Austria	0043	Kiribati	00686
Bahamas	001242	Kuwait	00965
Bahrain	00973	Kyrgyzstan	00996
Bangladesh	00880	Laos	00856
Barbados	001246	Latvia	00371
Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
Belize	00501	Libya	00218
Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
Bermuda	001441	Luxembourg	00352
Bhutan	00975	Macau	00853
Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
Bosnia	00387	Madagascar	00261
Botswana	00267	Majorca	0034
Brazil	0055	Malawi	00265
Brunei	00673	Malaysia	0060
Bulgaria	00359	Maldives	00960
Burkina Faso	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
Indonesia	0062	South Africa	0027

# CLINIC PAGE



Kuwait Times

248 33 199

Friday, March 20, 2020

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 Head & Neck Surgery and Facial Plastics.  
 Fellow of Royal College of Surgeons-Canada  
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- Diagnosis & Treatment of voice and swallowing disorders.
- Diagnosis & Treatment of Head and Neck benign & malignant tumors.

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**DR. FAHAD S BUHAIMED**  
 Consultant Cosmetic Dermatologist & Hair Transplant, NY

ACADAMIC CERTIFICATES:

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- o Fellowship training program in cosmetic dermatology and hair transplant, New York, USA.
- o Member of American cosmetic dermatology society.
- o Referee reviewer of International journal of Dermatology.

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**DR KHALED ALMERRI**  
 Consultant Interventional Cardiology  
 Department: Heart & Vascular Center

Specialized in:

- 1-Diagnostic and therapeutic cardiac catheterization (Angiography and Angioplasty), Aortic valve implantation.
- 2- Diagnosis and treatment of coronary artery diseases
- 3- Diagnosis and treatment of heart failure, cardiomyopathies and valvular diseases.
- 4-Diagnosis and treatment of high blood pressure and high cholesterol.
- 5- Diagnosis and treatment of syncope, palpitations and cardiac arrhythmias.
- 6- Non-invasive diagnostic procedures echocardiography, exercise stress test, and 24 hour blood pressure and Holter monitoring

**Dr. Hamoud Abdullah Alarouj**  
 ENT Consultant, Laryngologist

- ◆ Kuwait Board of Otolaryngology.
- ◆ Laryngology Fellowship, McGill University- Canada.
- ◆ Fellow of the European Board of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck surgery.
- ◆ Member of the American Academy of Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery.
- ◆ Member of the British Laryngological Association.
- ◆ Member of the European Laryngological Society.
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- ◆ Treatment of Irritable Bowel Symptoms
- ◆ Colonoscopy & Gastroscopy
- ◆ Stomach Balloon insertion & removal
- ◆ Bariatric Surgery - Lap Sleeve Gastrectomy
- ◆ Gallstones & Abdominal Hernias Surgery

Academic Certificates, Trainings & Fellowships:

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

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

**Dr. Ahmad Alaeddine**  
 Head of Cardiology departmenta at Dar Al Shifa hospital

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- Specialised in the Diagnosis and treatment of all adult cardiac diseases, including those cases that need urgent intervention in Cath lab (primary angioplasty).

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Consultant Pediatrician

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

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Al-Jabriya - Block 1A - St.1 - Mazaya Building - 15th Floor - Clinic B

### DR. WALEED S BUHAIMED

Consultant of General Surgery  
Laparoscopic and Bariatric Surgery

Academic Certificates – Training

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

Scope of clinical Practice.

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

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

# Classifieds

Friday, March 20, 2020

## CHANGE OF NAME

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, **Imran Can**, holder of Indian Passport No J3966727 r/o H. No. 163/1, Demani, Cuncolim, Salcete - Goa presently residing

Automated enquiry about the Civil ID card is **1889988**

**EMERGENCY 112**

## 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
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Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
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## Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

**BY DAY:** Warm with light to moderate northerly wind to north easterly wind, with speed of 10 - 30 km/h.

**BY NIGHT:** Rather cold with light to moderate northerly wind to north easterly wind, with speed of 12 - 35 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

WEATHER WARNING	No Current Warnings	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.
KUWAIT CITY	24 °C	18 °C
KUWAIT AIRPORT	28 °C	17 °C
ABDALY	27 °C	13 °C
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C
JAHRA	28 °C	16 °C
FAILAKA ISLAND	23 °C	17 °C
SALMIYAH	22 °C	19 °C
AHMADI	22 °C	20 °C
NUWAISIB	24 °C	16 °C
WAFRA	27 °C	13 °C
SALMY	28 °C	12 °C

SFC. CHART	19/03/2020 0000 UTC
MSL Analysis (hPa) Valid 0000 UTC 19 MAR 2020	

## 4 DAYS FORECAST

DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Friday	03/20	Warm and Partly cloudy to cloudy	26 °C	15 °C	NE-SE	10 - 30 km/h
Saturday	03/21	Relatively hot and Partly cloudy with a chance for drizzle and a chance for rising dust	31 °C	17 °C	SE-NW	15 - 50 km/h
Sunday	03/22	A significant decrease in temperature and Rather hot and Partly cloudy and rising dust over open	22 °C	14 °C	NW	20 - 50 km/h
Monday	03/23	Warm	26 °C	10 °C	NW-VRB	08 - 30 km/h

## PRAYER TIMES

Fajr	04:33
Sunrise	05:53
Zuhr	11:56
Asr	15:23
Sunset	17:58
Isha	19:15

## RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT

MAX. Temp.	24 °C
MIN. Temp.	17 °C
MAX. RH	93 %
MIN. RH	53 %
MAX. Wind	SE 71 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	10.6mm



FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 2020

# Business

## Zain breaks ground with live streamed AGM

**Applied Ministry of Health social distancing standards • Innovative, digital solution to global crisis**

**KUWAIT:** The Zain Group Annual General Meeting (AGM) was held yesterday at the Zain Group's headquarters in Kuwait, attended with a quorum of 69.95 percent that approved the recommended cash dividend of 33 fils per share (33 fils per share) to the shareholders already registered in the company's record date of 5 April 2020. Cash dividends will be paid to shareholders commencing 9 April 2020.

Additionally, a first by any corporate entity in Kuwait, the AGM approved Zain's adoption of a minimum cash dividend policy of 33 fils per share for three years, commencing 2019.

Furthermore, the AGM elected the Board of Directors for the next three years. The incoming Board members now constitute the following: Ahmed Tahous Al-Tahous, Representative of the Kuwait investment Authority; Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi, Elected; Yousef Khalid Abdul Razzaq, Representative of the Kuwait investment Authority; Talal bin Said Al-Mamari, Representative of Fajer Al Nasim for selling and buying stocks and bonds; Zaki Hilal Saud Al-Busaiddi, Representative of Jawhara Al-Jebelah for buying and selling Stocks and bonds; Atef bin Saeed bin Rashid Al-Siyabi, Representative of Abeer Al-Shorouq for selling and buying stocks and bonds; Abdullah Salem Abdullah Al-Harthy, Representative of Naseem Al-Delta For buying and selling stocks and bonds; Martial Antoine Marcel Caratti, Representative of Dana Al-Qebela for selling and buying stocks and bonds; Abdulrahman Mohammad Ibrahim Al-Asfour, Independent.

During the AGM, Zain Group announced its financial results for the full-year 2019, whereby the company served 49.5 million customers. The company generated consolidated revenue of KD 1.66 billion (\$5.5 billion), an impressive 26 percent Year-on-Year (Y-o-Y) growth, while consolidated EBITDA for the period rose by 40 percent Y-o-Y to reach KD 728 million (\$2.4 billion), reflecting a healthy EBITDA margin of 44 percent. Consolidated net income reached KD 217 million (\$715 million), up 10 percent Y-o-Y and reflecting Earnings Per Share of 50 fils (\$0.17).



**Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi**

For the full-year, foreign currency translation impact, predominantly due to the 30 percent currency devaluation in Sudan from an average of 31.9 to 45.8 (SDG / USD), cost the Group \$140 million in revenue, \$61 million in EBITDA and \$20 million in net income.

### Excerpts from Zain Group Chairman, Ahmed Al-Tahous statement at the AGM

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to welcome you to the AGM. The company's impressive performance for 2019 is testament to the successful implementation of the strategic and sustainability-conscious roadmap set by the Board and management. We will maintain our resolve to rollout high quality telecommunications services across our markets in a responsible manner, empowering and improving the socio-economic well-being of the communities we serve. We are proud of our pioneering role in Kuwait and across the region and look forward to 2020 and beyond with enthusiasm, as we take further steps in our aspirations to be a leading ICT and digital lifestyle provider.

Despite continuing competitive and socio-political challenges, Zain Group's performance during 2019 witnessed strong growth in all its financial indicators. This growth was underpinned by the successful rollout of numerous new digital services in both the consumer and enterprise space, coupled with solid performances across all our markets, as well as the



**KUWAIT: The Zain Group holds Annual General Meeting (AGM) yesterday at the Zain Group's headquarters in Kuwait.**

strategic consolidation of Zain Saudi Arabia into Zain Group. The company is committed to investing in its networks and taking advantage of the ever-increasing demand for broadband internet services. Zain continued to invest and upgrade its 3G and 4G networks across its footprint during 2019, and introduced 5G services in June 2019, making it the first operator to launch the technology in Kuwait and the region. Zain went on to

launch the largest 5G network in Saudi Arabia in October 2019, which at the time was the largest in the MENA and Europe and third largest globally, and in November, announced plans of a 5G launch by Zain Bahrain within the first half of 2020.

I would like to thank all the government ministries and regulatory authorities across our markets for their wisdom and

**Continued on Page 34**

- Zain Group Chairman, Ahmed Al-Tahous: "During 2019, Zain witnessed strong growth in all its financial indicators, due to the successful implementation of the strategic roadmap and rollout of new services"
- Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO, Bader Al-Kharafi: "New dividend policy reflects confidence in the future potential of our digital growth strategy in seeking new business verticals"
- Board of Directors elected for the next three years
- Cash dividends to be distributed to eligible shareholders on April 9, 2020
- Company provided livestreaming of meeting to registered shareholders
- Transforming all operations to extract value from the Fourth Industrial Revolution
- Huge investment in 5G rollouts in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and network expansion paying off
- Focus on launching innovative digital and cloud services for government and businesses
- Embedding sustainability, diversity and inclusion in every aspect of Zain's core business

## Business

Continued from Page 33

understanding of the emerging industry dynamics, supporting us in overcoming challenges faced by the telecom sector.

#### Excerpts from Zain Group Vice-Chairman and Group CEO, Bader Al-Kharafi's AGM statement

It is a profound pleasure to address the AGM considering the exceptional operational and financial year we achieved in 2019. Across activities and geographies, Zain Group excelled substantially, leveraging the talent of its progressive workforce and seeking opportunities in new lucrative areas. These include appealing digital services offered through our state-of-the-art 4G and 5G platforms and the development of enterprise and cloud solutions serving the government and business sectors in order to drive revenues and margins. In rapidly changing ecosystems defined by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and a greater demand for accountability, the need to evolve the organization to extract maximum value while implementing a more responsive approach to the environment and specifically climate change is highly relevant to Zain. Across our footprint, more than 7,200 dedicated and talented Zainers continue to strive to provide customers Meaningful Connectivity through a relevant range of services to help the communities we serve lead better lives.

#### New 3-year dividend policy

A first by any corporate entity in Kuwait, the Board of Directors have recommended a new cash dividend policy committing the company to a minimum 33 fils for three years inclusive of 2019. This recommendation is a result of the impressive operational performance attained by the Group in recent years and confidence in the future potential of our digital growth strategy in seeking new business verticals. We expect to reap healthy rewards from our investments in 5G, Fiber and network upgrades across key markets that support the ever-increasing demand for mobile and fixed broadband services by individuals and enterprises alike.

#### Investing for growth

Throughout 2019, Zain Group invested over USD 1 billion in CAPEX, predominantly in expansion of Fiber-to-the-Home (FTTH) infrastructure; spectrum fees; 4G upgrades and new network sites across its markets, as well as 5G rollouts in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In addition to supporting our digital transformation aspirations, this huge investment is paying off as reflected by the 36 percent annual growth in the Group consolidated data revenue that reached \$2 billion, representing 36 percent of the Group's revenue for 2019.

#### Digital strategy gains momentum

Our digital expansion strategy is taking shape, centered on evolving our core telecom business to maximize value and building on our many strengths to selectively invest in growth verticals beyond standard mobile services that support our vision of becoming a



leading ICT and digital lifestyle provider that makes the world a better place. Moreover, we are setting up structures and entering into key partnerships in the FINTECH and e-Health arena as well as with our newly established Zain Drone entity that was launched in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to date, and opening our APIs across key markets to offer appealing entertainment and gaming services, so as to reap the lucrative opportunities in the digital space. We will continue to foster this lucrative and customer appealing platform that provides customers access to multiple mobile-led services. Zain Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are benefitting from new

revenue streams from this cloud API service, with Omantel recently joining the platform.

#### Regulatory key to 5G

To ensure the success of our strategy, we have been very active in the regulatory arena in regard to spectrum acquisition and in seeking support from regulators and other government authorities. During 2019, we acquired or renewed over 600 MHz of the frequency spectrum across markets in various bands at an acquisition commitment price of nearly \$300 million. In Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, the allocation of these spectrum bands has facilitated the launch of 5G services as is the case with Bahrain that will soon launch 5G. On this

**Health Safety:** Zain provided Live Streaming of AGM to registered shareholders

- Fulfilling its obligations towards its shareholders, Zain held its Annual General Meeting (AGM) in Kuwait in an open-air setting following guidelines set by the Ministry of Health

- Given the circumstances, Zain Group transmitted livestreaming of the AGM in Arabic and English to registered shareholders, who were unable to attend due to safety concerns or travel restrictions

- Shareholders on the live broadcast were granted five minutes to ask questions

- As the first company in Kuwait to provide livestreaming of its AGM, Zain hopes that other listed entities follow suit, to fulfill their obligations towards shareholders

considering these current conditions

- Al-Kharafi thanked the shareholders for their cooperation, and the technical and support teams for their efforts in providing the live stream within the safety guidelines

Zain studying options re Mobile Virtual Network Operator (MVNO)

Recently the relevant authorities in Kuwait extended the application period for the awarding of a MVNO license. Commenting on this matter, Al-Kharafi acknowledged that a MVNO can complement existing telecom operators given the mechanism in which MVNOs operate. Furthermore, Al-Kharafi indicated that Zain is studying its options within the extended application period and will make a decision based on the best interests of shareholders and all other stakeholders.

point, I would like to point out that we were the first operator in the region to offer 5G roaming between Kuwait and KSA back in November.

The company is mobilizing resources to capitalize on the enormous prospects that 5G technology provides, creating vast opportunities in the value chain proposition in numerous industries, especially with regard to enterprise (B2B) services to government and businesses of all sizes. We believe 5G will push the telecom sector to a new and exciting phase of growth.

#### Sustainability, Diversity & Inclusion

A core part of the strategy is the creation of positive socio-economic impacts across the region, which begin within the company. Priorities within our sustainability efforts include, but are not limited to, contributing to the socio-economic development of our operating countries; aligning to climate change targets and developing our employees, all of which ultimately leads to a more successful and profitable organization.

In our world, digital and technological advancements offer endless opportunities to not only address negative impacts but create positive ones. Through digitization, our wide range of services, and reach, we aim to unlock the many opportunities that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer, as sustainability is an intrinsic part of our DNA. Most recently, for example, Zain became a member of the Climate Disclosure Project (CDP), thus paving the way to a structured reduction of our environmental footprint.

Zain's Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives are among the most compelling and comprehensive of any organization in the region. The work that Zain currently does within the organization to foster understanding and offer great life and work opportunities to all employees is truly inspiring.

Initiatives that fall under our D&I focus, to name just a few, include Gender Diversity (Women Empowerment); our aim for Zain to become Disability Inclusive by 2022 (WE ABLE); becoming a signatory to the International Labor Organization (ILO) Global Business and Disability Network Charter; Reverse Mentoring and our Generation Z graduate program (ZY); and our internal innovation program (ZAINIAC).

These D&I-based programs have all become central to Zain's development as an organization, with their overwhelming success seeing Zain operations immediately enjoy many direct benefits as well as being appreciated by our own people and external stakeholders alike.

On a final note, on behalf of the executive management team, I would like to express my deep, personal gratitude to the Zain workforce, the Board of Directors, and the government agencies and bodies we cooperate with to deliver the mobile experience and services we do at such a high level. I believe we can look ahead with confidence as we continue to make considerable progress and help uplift the societies we serve along the way.

Thank you

## Business

# AUB's AGM approves a dividend of 20% in cash and 10% in bonus shares

## 2019 was a very successful year for AUB: Al-Othman

**KUWAIT:** Ahli United Bank B.S.C held yesterday its Annual General Meeting (AGM) and its Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) at the Bank's headquarters in the Seef district, Kingdom of Bahrain. The proceedings were attended by shareholders representing 78.25 percent of the Bank's total issued shares.

The AUB AGM approved the distribution of a cash dividend of 20 percent (\$5.0 cents per share), totaling \$438.7 million, together with a bonus share issue of 10 percent (one share per 10 ordinary shares) in respect of fiscal 2019. AUB shareholders also ratified the reduction of the number of Directors from eleven to ten Directors.

At the AUB EGM held on the same day,

the shareholders approved the amendment of AUB's Memorandum and Articles of Association to increase its capital by 877,444,428 shares, to cover the issuance of the approved 10 percent bonus shares distribution for 2019. They also approved the extension, for a further two years, of their standing authorization for the Board of Directors to decide on the timing, pricing and other terms of issuance of up to \$4 billion in bonds, loans and other subordinated or capital equivalent financial instruments, as necessary to support the funding and capitalization plans of the Bank.

Addressing shareholders, AUB's Chairman Meshal AbdulAziz Al-Othman said: "2019 was a very successful year for AUB.

Despite the challenging and highly volatile operating environment, I am pleased to report another year of record net profit, capping a long and uninterrupted streak of year-on-year growth since 2009. The Group's net profit climbed to \$730.5 million on the back of broadly diversified operating income of \$1,235.5 million, as we continued to deepen our client focus and engagement by sector and geography, to accelerate our digital transformation initiatives and to press ahead with better positioning AUB for the future. This robust financial performance also reflects the resilience of the Bank's business model and reaps the benefits of our investing over the years in building a strong and syner-

gistic regional network of banks to serve our targeted markets".

"This AGM also marks AUB's twentieth anniversary, and there is much to celebrate. AUB today is well recognized as a strong, established bank with a unique regional banking vision. AUB is very proud of its outstanding financial track record, one of the most consistent and successful in the industry. It has rewarded its shareholders' confidence and support with market leading returns on a sustained annual basis. Since 2008, we have increased our equity by \$2.3 billion while returning \$3 billion in cash dividends to our shareholders, including \$1.8 billion in the last five years"



Meshal AbdulAziz Al-Othman

## Burberry store sales slump 30%

**LONDON:** British luxury fashion group Burberry yesterday said its store sales have collapsed by nearly one third in its current quarter owing to the coronavirus pandemic. Sales have dived by about 30 percent since January approaching the end of the group's fourth quarter, and compared with one year ago, Burberry said in a trading update.

The gloomy performance follows "the significant escalation of governmental trading, travel and social restrictions in recent days and the inevitable impact this will have on demand", the group added.

Burberry had warned in February that the coronavirus would have a negative impact on demand in key market China, where the epidemic began. "Since our February update, the material negative effect of COVID-19 on luxury demand has intensified and is now impacting the industry in all regions," chief executive Marco Gobetti said in yesterday's update.

"Our primary concern is the global health emergency and we continue to take every precaution to help prevent the spread of the virus and ensure the safety and well-being of our employees, partners and customers. "We are implementing mitigating actions to contain our costs and protect our financial position, underpinned by our strong balance sheet," he added. —AFP

## China to ramp up spending to revive economy

**BEIJING:** China is set to unleash trillions of yuan of fiscal stimulus to revive an economy expected to shrink for the first time in four decades amid the coronavirus pandemic, while a planned growth target is likely to be cut, according to four policy sources.

The ramped-up spending will aim to spur infrastructure investment, backed by as much as 2.8 trillion yuan (\$394 billion) of local government special bonds, said the sources. The national budget deficit ratio could rise to record levels, they added. Beijing is likely to have to lower its economic growth target for 2020 given the prolonged impact of the pandemic, according to the sources involved in internal policy discussions who declined to be named due to the sensitivity of the matter.

Chinese leaders are considering proposals from advisers to cut it to as low as 5 percent from the original target of around 6 percent agreed in December, they added. The National Development and Reform Commission, the top state planner, the finance ministry and the central bank did not immediately respond to Reuters' request for comment.

The measures come at a time when private-sector analysts are slashing their growth forecasts for China to lows not seen since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, with a sharp contraction expected in the first quarter. China's growth hit a near 30-year low of 6.1 percent in 2019, and the landscape has darkened significantly this year as the virus outbreak and strict containment have severely disrupted businesses.

"When the economy is suffering a big shock, it's necessary to step up fiscal policy support given that monetary policy will have limited effectiveness," a policy source said. Higher spending could push the 2020 budget deficit ratio to as high as 3.5 percent - up from last year's 2.8 percent, the sources said.



SHANGHAI: This file photo shows two crew members walking past business jets ahead of the 2016 Asian Business Aviation Conference and Exhibition (ABACE 2016) at Shanghai Hongqiao Airport in Shanghai. —AFP

The government has long kept a 3 percent ceiling on the annual budget deficit ratio, which was last reached in 2017, and a level of 3.5 percent would be the highest on record, analysts said. On Monday, National Bureau of Statistics spokesman Mao Shengyong said at a briefing that there was room for appropriately raising the annual budget deficit ratio. The central bank could, meanwhile, cut banks' reserve requirement ratios and interest rates further to help spur lending and lower funding costs for firms, the policy sources said. China has already rolled out a raft of fiscal and monetary measures to provide credit and tax relief to companies, especially small businesses that have borne the brunt of the outbreak.

### New infrastructure

Beijing is targeting infrastructure investment as a recovery in consumption could be slowed by rising job losses rise, while exports could be hit as the global

economy reels from the pandemic, the policy sources said. Local governments will be allowed to issue more special bonds, which could hit 2.5-2.8 trillion yuan this year, compared with 2.15 trillion yuan in 2019, the sources said. The government aims to speed up the construction of planned key infrastructure projects as well as to launch some new projects for public health, emergency materials supply, 5G networks and data centers that have been endorsed by top leaders, the policy sources said.

"We need to find infrastructure projects that are vital to the economy, but it's more difficult to find good projects than in 1998 and 2008," said a second source, referring to the Asian financial crisis and global crisis. Beijing faces constraints from rising debt levels and falling investment returns, following repeated stimulus efforts since the global financial crisis, when it unleashed a massive spending package. —Reuters

## Business

# European stocks steadier as ECB bazooka targets virus

## Oil jumps after three-day slump but virus and oversupply still weigh

**LONDON:** European stock markets were steadier yesterday after the European Central Bank stepped up its stimulus action to combat the huge economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. The dollar, seen as a safe haven investment, was in demand as people scramble for cash to pay debts or stash away.

Elsewhere, the pound was stuck around its lowest levels since the mid-1980s, while Asian stock markets closed lower. Oil prices rebounded, but the gains did little to overturn massive losses Wednesday, which saw WTI lose around a quarter of its value. Oil markets have been hammered by collapsing demand as the virus prompts sweeping travel restrictions and business closures combined with a price war between key producers Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Approaching the half-way mark, the Frankfurt, London and Paris stock markets dropped but Madrid and Milan rose as investors eyed the European Central Bank's \$820-billion plan to stem the economic damage from the COVID-19 crisis. Investors have seen "the European Central Bank calm markets, at least for now, with their stimulus package", Scope Markets analyst James Hughes told AFP.

Oil prices bounced nearly 7 percent yesterday

after a three-day selloff drove them to their lowest in almost two decades as demand plummeted due to the coronavirus and supplies surged in a fight for market share between Russia and Saudi Arabia.

Benchmark Brent, which has lost half its value in less than two weeks, got some respite as investors across financial markets assessed the impact of massive central bank stimulus measures.

Brent crude jumped \$1.43, or 5.75 percent, to \$26.33 a barrel by 1045 GMT, after plunging to \$24.52 on Wednesday, its lowest level since 2003. US crude gained \$2.40, or 11.8 percent, to \$22.77 after dropping nearly 25 percent in the previous session to an 18-year low.

But analysts said gains were likely to be temporary, as tumbling demand was compounded by the collapse this month of a deal on supply curbs between OPEC and other producers. The drop in demand, particularly in transportation, is also leading to a rapidly growing glut in refined products such as jet fuel and gasoline.

Saudi Arabia, the de facto leader of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which kicked off a price war with Russia that sent prices into tailspin, is planning to keep pumping at a record



**LONDON:** A man poses in front of a screen displaying London Exchange's FTSE-100. European stock markets were steadier yesterday after the European Central Bank stepped up its stimulus action to combat the huge economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

rate of 12.3 million barrels per day (bpd) for months. "From April 1, about 4 million bpd could flood the markets, potentially pushing down crude oil prices

into the teens," Jefferies said in a note. "Unless somebody intervenes, no oil producer benefits from the current environment." —AFP

## Russia props up ruble, oil producers

**MOSCOW:** Russia announced yesterday new measures to prop up the ruble and its oil producers, both of which have been suffering from sinking oil prices and the global panic over the coronavirus.

"The government and the central bank will continue to take the necessary actions to ensure financial stability," Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said. He announced that the central bank would increase sales of foreign currency reserves, which helps support the value of the ruble, after the Russian currency exceeded the symbolic barrier of 80 rubles per dollar on Wednesday evening, a rate not seen since early 2016 during Russia's last economic crisis.

Mishustin said the central bank would also compensate oil producers the difference when the market price for Urals crude falls below \$25 per barrel. On Wednesday, it was selling for \$24.65 per barrel.

This new mechanism will remain in place until the end of September. The prime minister on Monday announced that the government would unlock reserves of 300 billion rubles (\$3.8 billion at current exchange rates) to help support the economy. Yesterday he announced a month-long "green corridor" from Friday to allow the import of the most essential goods without paying duty.

He sought to reassure the public that Russia will not run out of food. "Agriculture is the basis of our security, not just in terms of providing food but also in terms of economic and social security," he said.

"We have enough food," Mishustin added that from Friday government agencies will be monitoring "all prices in each region, in each chain of stores and pharmaceutical organizations". —AFP

## US automakers to shut North American plants

**DETROIT:** US automakers announced they will temporarily shut down North American production as the economic hit from the coronavirus spreads to manufacturing.

The "Big Three" car makers—General Motors, Fiat Chrysler and Ford—will halt operations throughout North America through the end of the month, the companies announced in conjunction with the United Auto Workers (UAW). The move comes only hours after the companies said the plants would be kept open with modified procedures to employ social distancing.

But that plan quickly fell by the wayside as the number of coronavirus cases in the US rises.

UAW officials admitted privately they were facing a situation where absenteeism was increasing as schools closed in states such as Michigan and Ohio. In addition, employees were refusing to work after co-workers tested positive for the virus. "Today's action is the prudent thing to do. By taking a shutdown and working through next steps, we protect UAW members, their families and the community," UAW President Rory Gamble said in a statement with Ford.

"GM and the UAW have always put the health and safety of the people entering GM plants first, and we have agreed to a systematic, orderly suspension of production to aid in fighting COVID-19/coronavirus," said GM Chief Executive Mary Barra. "We have been taking extraordinary precautions around the world to keep our plant environments safe and recent developments in North America make it clear this is the right thing to do now." Ford closed an assembly plant in Michigan on Wednesday morning after an employee tested positive and "is thoroughly



**DETROIT:** Workers leave FCA Chrysler Warren Truck Assembly after the Detroit three automakers have agreed to UAW demands to shut down all North America plants as a precaution against coronavirus. —AFP

cleaning and disinfecting the building," the statement said.

Japanese giant Toyota also decided to pause all production in North America, but for only two days at the moment, next Monday and Tuesday. Nissan also announced yesterday it would suspend production in the US from March 20 until April 6. The shutdowns reached into Canada where Unifor, the union representing Canadian workers, had been under pressure to withdraw the labor of its members.

Jessica Caldwell of motoring site Edmunds.com described the announcement as "a seismic move by the Detroit 3, but also a commendable one." "These automakers are currently well-stocked with inventory and as more of the country moves to follow shelter-in-place orders, vehicle sales will inevitably be softer," she said in a note.

"But if the proposed stimulus package ends up moving through the Senate, this could help sales get to a bit of a healthier place when normal life resumes." —AFP

## Sports

# India's Tendulkar compares virus battle to Test cricket

## India reports four virus deaths and 199 cases

**NEW DELHI:** Indian legend Sachin Tendulkar has offered an unusual take on the coronavirus fight by comparing it to Test cricket, urging patience and teamwork, and warning "we have to defend well". "While the world battles the Covid-19 pandemic, this is probably the time for us to draw lessons from the grand old format of the game," Tendulkar wrote in a commentary for The Times of India newspaper.

The world record-holding batsman said the virus was "beyond our collective comprehension" but could be beaten with tactics used in cricket's five-day format. "Test cricket rewards you for respecting what you don't understand. It makes you value the virtue of patience," he wrote. "When you don't understand the pitch conditions or the bowler, defense becomes the best form of attack. Patience is what we require now, if we have to defend well."

India has reported only four virus deaths and

199 cases but the country is increasingly fearful of the spread of the disease that has killed nearly 9,000 people around the world. Like many countries, it has imposed draconian travel restrictions. Tendulkar, 46, retired in 2013 after scoring 15,921 runs from 200 Tests, and has considerable influence in Indian society.

He said all countries must work together against the virus. "To use a cricketing metaphor; while individual brilliance can help a team in shorter formats of the game, in Test cricket it is all about partnerships and teamwork," he said. "Test cricket is about staging comebacks. There is always a second innings, if you've missed the first one." "Different countries are at different stages of their fight against coronavirus," he added. "All nations should consider themselves part of one team." "We shall take this battle session by session, and eventually emerge victorious." — AFP



MUMBAI: A man wearing a facemask as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus walks past a mural of former Indian cricketer Sachin Tendulkar in Mumbai yesterday. — AFP

## Asian golfers could lose out if Olympics go ahead: Tour chief

**HONG KONG:** The Olympics going ahead in Tokyo this year is "highly unlikely", the boss of Asian golf told AFP, and proceeding as planned could cost players the chance to qualify. The International Olympic Committee said this week it was "fully committed" to holding the Games from July 24 despite the coronavirus pandemic, but acknowledged there was no "ideal" solution as pressure mounted for a postponement. Asian Tour Commissioner and CEO Cho Minn Thant confirmed that all tournaments across the continent had been suspended until at least the end of May, in line with the US PGA and European Tours.

"I think everyone right now is more in a state of shock, just trying to figure out what they do with themselves," said Cho, speaking by telephone from Asian Tour headquarters in Singapore. With the prospect of scarcely any competitive golf before the Olympic rankings qualifying cut-off on June 22, Cho said it would be harsh on players from unheralded golf nations. "Our plan initially was to have about 16 or 17 tournaments before the Olympic cut-off," Cho said. "Today, we probably have only about four or five Asian Tour players eligible for the Olympics."

### Olympics 'highly unlikely'

On current rankings, only Thailand's Jazz Janewatnanond and Gunn Charoenkul, the Indian pair of Rashid Khan and Udayan Mane plus Miguel Tabuena of the Philippines would represent the Asian Tour in the 60-strong Tokyo field. "Given the amount of golf that was left to be played, we were hopeful that more players from nations

like Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines would have the opportunity to get into the Olympics over the next two or three months," said Cho. "Obviously, that's not going to happen."

"I can understand why they would want to push forward with the Olympics - there'd be huge revenue ramifications on the economy of Japan - but it seems highly unlikely now in my opinion." Cho said that he hadn't yet heard of any players suffering financial hardship but acknowledged that a long layoff could have an impact. Players such as the world number 39 Jazz, last year's Asian Tour order of merit winner, will remain in the US where he had been due to play a full schedule before a debut at the now-postponed US Masters next month.

"I keep in contact with quite a few players and a lot of them are comfortable," Cho said. "I feel for the guys who just came through qualifying school and they've probably played one or two events in their life. "It's very different to having a bad season where you're missing cuts, but you still have got the opportunity to compete. "Right now you're deprived of the opportunity to compete. That's a whole different ballgame."

### Calendar shift

The Asian Tour can play all-year round, which means the crisis could lead to a permanent shift in the Asian golfing calendar to a wraparound season played from September to April. "A tour like Europe's going to have a lot harder time rescheduling events. Theirs is a very short golf season," Cho said. "I'm hoping that we can continue golf this year, whether it be July, September, October or November. It will definitely help mitigate the potential downside. "If we could start between July and October, it means we will probably go through to April. We've been planning a wrap-around season for the longest time but never really formalized it. "We're talking to sponsors and promoters. They're definitely ready to go. They're prepared to stage events whenever the world is ready to get back to normal." — AFP

## Anderson fears virus could wreck English cricket season

**LONDON:** England fast bowler James Anderson fears the global coronavirus pandemic could see the domestic and international season abandoned completely. The England and Wales Cricket Board are due to meet with the 18 first-class counties, possibly by teleconference, in a bid to see whether the existing structure for the 2020 summer can be maintained. It follows Wednesday's decision by the ECB to recommend the suspension of the recreational game.

The County Championship is meant to start on April 12 but a delay looks increasingly likely given other sports have called a halt following British government advice to avoid mass gatherings. Last week saw England postpone their tour of Sri Lanka. They are next meant to play the West Indies in a three-Test home series, starting on June 4. "Cricket and sport is not the be all and end all but it is my livelihood, it's all I know," Anderson told the BBC's Tailenders podcast.

"The season is unlikely to start. It's still a little bit hazy as to what's going to happen. There's a chance we might not even bowl a ball this summer." The Lancashire paceman, England's all-time leading Test wicket-taker, added: "I feel a little bit anxious. Just the not knowing is giving me a bit of anxiety." Anderson made the last of his 151 Test appearances against South Africa in Cape Town in January before a broken rib saw him miss the last two matches of the series.

The 37-year-old was not selected for the Sri Lanka series in the hope he would be fully fit for the start of the home season. Anderson said personal issues caused by the global COVID-19 impact were a consideration as well. "Also trying to keep a young family healthy," he said. — AFP

## Sports

# Organizers receive Olympic flame for troubled Games

## Ceremony staged inside empty central Athens stadium

**ATHENS:** Tokyo 2020 organizers received the Olympic flame in a scaled-down handover ceremony in the Greek capital yesterday, amid the coronavirus spread that has cast doubt on the global, multi-billion dollar event. In a brief ceremony closed to spectators in Athens' Panathenaic stadium, site of the first modern Games in 1896, the torch was received by Tokyo Games representative Naoko Imoto.

It will arrive in Japan today and kick off a domestic relay on March 26, with the Games set to take place from July 24-Aug 9. A six-day torch relay through Greece was cancelled last week, with the country largely in lockdown having recorded 418 cases of the virus and five deaths. The scale of the spreading coronavirus, which has infected more than 200,000 people and killed more than 8,700 across the world, has forced the cancellation of numerous sporting events, raising concerns about whether the Olympics will be able to open as planned.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Japanese government, however, have insisted the Games will go ahead and have publicly rejected any talk of cancellation or postponement. Greece's Olympic Committee chief Spyros Capralos handed over the lit torch

to the Japanese former Olympic swimmer Imoto in front of empty stands inside the vast 50,000-capacity horseshoe-shaped marble stadium.

The flame was then transferred into a small receptacle to travel to Japan aboard a special aircraft named "Tokyo 2020 Go." Only a few dozen officials were allowed into the central Athens stadium as the country has imposed strict measures to contain the spread of the virus. The eerie mood during the ceremony, which normally attracts thousands of Athenians and visitors, reflected the problems facing Tokyo 2020, with athletes and national Olympic committees questioning whether the Games should be held this year.

Despite the IOC's commitment to the Games, several athletes have cast doubt on the quality of competitions in Tokyo, given that thousands cannot train at the moment due to restrictions placed upon them in many countries. Tokyo Games chief Yoshiro Mori said in a video message he hoped the flame's arrival would help lift Japan's spirits.

"Tokyo 2020 commits to be in readiness for the Games as planned..." Mori said. "The concept of the Tokyo relay is 'Hope lights our way'.



**ATHENS:** An athlete lights the Olympic torch during the olympic flame handover ceremony for the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics yesterday in Athens. —AFP

I hope that the light will shine on the hearts of people all over in Japan and that will shake off the dark clouds hanging over the earth." The plane carrying the flame will land at JASDF Matsushima Air Base in Miyagi Prefecture today.

The domestic relay will start from Fukushima Prefecture, site of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, and will last for 121 days. It is planned to end at the Games' opening ceremony with the lighting of the Olympic cauldron. — Reuters

## Aussie Super Rugby teams train despite virus shutdown

**SYDNEY:** Australian Super Rugby players insisted it's "business as usual" as they resumed training despite a coronavirus shutdown that has left the competition facing an uncertain future. The southern hemisphere club championship, which features 15 teams from five countries, was halted last weekend after New Zealand and Australia imposed strict travel rules to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Only seven of the 18 rounds have been completed, with governing body SANZAAR looking at whether domestic games can be played as an alternative.

It could see Australia's Queensland Reds, NSW Waratahs, Melbourne Rebels and the ACT Brumbies facing each other, but without spectators after the Australian government banned large gatherings. "So this is week one of Super Rugby being suspended over the coronavirus outbreak. It's business as usual mostly," Melbourne Rebels winger Harry Potter said in a video clip posted on Twitter. "Training is back to normal, people are just getting on with things." "People are pretty happy to be here, there's plenty of toilet paper, there's plenty of food so everyone's enjoying themselves," he added, after panic-buying of toilet roll and other items at Australian supermarkets. —AFP

## Japan surf star hoping to avoid 'heartbreaking' Olympic cancellation

**TOKYO:** Japan's top surfer Kanoa Igarashi is already seeing his training for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics hit by the coronavirus outbreak, but he's still hoping a "heartbreaking" cancellation can be avoided. "The travel ban is what's affecting me the most. Not being able to go anywhere. That's the main one," the 22-year-old told AFP in an interview on Wednesday from Los Angeles.

"Surfing is a sport where we have to travel a lot to train in different types of conditions and types of waves in the world." "For me as an athlete, as a possible Olympian, it's affecting training," added Igarashi, who was born and raised in the United States but represents Japan. The bleach-blond Igarashi is a gold medal hope for his home country at the 2020 Games, where surfing will make its debut.

But the global coronavirus pandemic has raised growing questions about whether the Games can open as scheduled on July 24. Organizers have scrapped qualifiers, scaled back test events and altered the Olympic torch relay. On Tuesday, the deputy head of Japan's Olympic committee announced he had contracted the virus. The waves of bad news have left athletes around the world in limbo, with lockdowns and quarantines making it increasingly hard for them to train for Games that might not even take place.

"It's a little bit difficult to try to motivate (myself), preparing for something that might possibly not be there," Igarashi conceded. "It's a time to be a little bit unsure and worried." But he

said the chance to represent his sport at its first outing at the Games was keeping him going. "I feel really proud to be part of surfing right now. That's my motivation," he said. "The goal has been so clear for the last two years for me that I'm going to keep going the same way I have been preparing for the Olympics," he said. Surfing will feature as part of a drive to make the Games relevant to younger audiences, after being included for the first time along with skateboarding and sport climbing. The surfing competition will be held in Chiba, northeast of Tokyo and Igarashi said he felt he would be representing the sport as a whole. "It's such a big opportunity for us as a sport," said Igarashi, whose backers include the Kinoshita Group conglomerate. "That's what motivates me to want to do my best and bring my best performance out and to win the gold medal not just for my country, Japan, but also for the world of surfing."

Organizers have insisted preparation for the Games continues despite the spread of the new coronavirus, which has infected more than 200,000 people and killed over 8,000 worldwide. On Tuesday, the International Olympic Committee said it was not the time for "drastic decisions" on a possible postponement or cancellation of the Games. Some athletes have hit back at the IOC for its stance, pointing to cancellation of qualifiers and the impossibility of training as the world hunkers down against the virus.

Igarashi said a cancellation of the Games would be "very heartbreaking for many people". But the surfer, who has already provisionally qualified for the Games, said he was confident the IOC would make the right call. "I know the IOC will think about the health of the athletes and also doing what's right," he said. "Obviously, everybody wants to compete. Everybody in the Olympics, they want to compete deep down inside." But he said, since the decision was "out of my control" he wouldn't focus on it. "Whatever happens, everything happens for reason," he said. "I'm trying to stay positive." — AFP

## Sports

# Football League chiefs agree £50m rescue package amid virus chaos

**LONDON:** The English Football League has announced a £50 million (\$58 million) relief package to assist financially stricken clubs during the shut-down caused by the coronavirus. English football is suspended as part of the worldwide bid to slow the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus. It is expected matches will not resume at the April 3 date named by Football League and Premier League chiefs as their hoped-for return.

Instead, the focus has moved to helping the lower division clubs struggling with the financial ramifications of the delay to the season. Some teams fear they could be forced out of business if football doesn't return until after the summer. Finance was among the topics discussed at Wednesday's EFL Board meeting, when a plan was agreed to help ease the financial burden for cash-strapped teams in the Championship, League One and League Two - the second, third and fourth tiers of English football.

"As part of the League's continued contingency planning, the Board heard the comments and observations from EFL Clubs, before discussing a number of issues including the current financial position and implications, insurance, regulatory matters and broadcasting arrangements," an EFL

statement said. "Discussions centered on financial relief for Clubs in the short term and while there is no one single solution, measures are to be put in place to immediately assist with cash flow via a £50million short-term relief package."

The EFL board are reviewing the threat and impact of the virus through a dedicated taskforce, but they remain committed to finishing the season if possible. "The primary objective, in order to protect competition integrity, is to deliver a successful conclusion to the 2019-20 season, subject to the overriding priority around health and well-being," the statement read. "Plans continue to be developed on the agreed principle that it is in the best interests of the EFL and clubs to complete the current season at the appropriate time."

"The EFL is continuing regular dialogue with the government and relevant health authorities and, as and when more information is known regarding the scale and extent of the coronavirus outbreak in this country, a decision will be taken on the resumption of the league's fixtures." The EFL also announced the postponement of the Football League Trophy final between Portsmouth and Salford, which was scheduled to be played at Wembley in front of over 50,000 fans on April 5.—AFP



**LIVERPOOL:** This picture shows Everton's Goodison Park football ground on the day that the club should have played the Merseyside derby against Liverpool in the English Premier League, in Liverpool. — AFP

## Caputo, the voice of optimism in Italian football

**ROME:** "Everything will be fine. Stay at home." Sassuolo striker Francesco Caputo understood before everyone else. The Italian's reassuring message came hours before the government halted all sport in the country amid the devastating coronavirus pandemic. Italy was already worried, the disease had done a lot of damage, and movement restrictions were about to be implemented.

It was March 9 and Europe was still playing football despite the escalating health crisis. That night in Emilia-Romagna, a region hard hit by the virus, home side Sassuolo beat Brescia 3-0 in what would be the last match in an Italian championship since suspended. After the first of his two goals, Caputo turned to a camera and held up a handwritten message on a sheet of paper. "Andra tutto bene. Restate a casa": everything will be fine, stay home.

A few hours later, the head of the Italian government Giuseppe Conte used the same words - "Stay at home" - to explain to Italians the new draconian provisions put in place to fight against the pandemic. Since then, the concrete and reassuring message of "Ciccio" Caputo has made its way even beyond the world of football. It is found in all information and awareness-raising campaigns and even on banners hanging from windows all over the country.

"It was my idea. I hadn't told anyone. I wanted to get this message across. It is a difficult period for the whole nation," said the 32-year-old. "We want to protect our

families. For example, at home I have my wife with three children, not letting them leave home is very difficult but we are very attentive to the rules." But the player, currently the second top Italian scorer in Serie A with 13 goals, behind the untouchable Ciro Immobile (27), did not stop there.

### 'Maturity of a man'

Like many other footballers, now deprived of playing time, he has become involved in helping raise funds for those in the medical world, on the front line facing the crisis which has killed nearly 3,000 and infected over 13,000 in Italy. He participated along with other Serie A players in a juggling competition as part of a fundraiser for hospitals.

He also auctioned his No.9 jersey worn during the final match this month, signed with the now famous motto "Andra tutto Bene". The 2,500 euros (\$2,600) raised were donated to health authorities in Italy's southern Puglia region, from where he hails. It was in this region, in the heel of Italy, where Caputo started his career in his native Bari under coach Antonio Conte. "I will be forever grateful to him. He launched me in Serie B, with Bari (in 2008) and that day I scored a hat-trick," explained Caputo.

"Then he wanted me in Siena (2010-11). He taught me the importance of sacrifice. With him, when you return home, you're totally exhausted." His year in Siena under Conte was the first of nine seasons for Caputo in Serie B. After two seasons with Empoli, helping them to top-flight promotion in 2018, his form has exploded this term since joining Sassuolo last July. "He's a master in the art of in-depth attacking and marking," said Sassuolo coach Roberto De Zerbi. "He arrived late in Serie A. His strength is that he takes advantage of all this with the maturity of a man." — AFP

## No relegation in Japan top flight this season

**TOKYO:** Clubs in Japan's top domestic soccer league have agreed that there will be no relegation this season, the J League announced yesterday, with the campaign severely disrupted by the coronavirus outbreak. The season was only one match old when the decision was made to postpone matches. No fixtures have been played since Feb 23. The pandemic has brought the global sporting calendar to a standstill, with top soccer leagues in Europe being put on hold while the Euro 2020 tournament has been delayed until next year.

Organizers of the Tokyo Olympics, however, have insisted they are moving forward with the July 24 start as planned despite concerns about the virus, which has infected more than 212,000 people and killed over 8,700 in 164 nations. The J League also announced that if 75% of the campaign is completed then the top two teams in the second and third tiers of Japanese soccer will automatically be promoted. If the top division, which currently has 18 teams, increases to 20 sides for the 2021 season then the league would feature four relegation spots. — Reuters



ATHENS: Greek actress Xanthi Georgiou dressed as an ancient Greek high priestess lights the olympic torch during the olympic flame handover ceremony for the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics yesterday in Athens. — AFP

## Organizers receive Olympic flame for troubled Games

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