

2 Cabinet again warns against gatherings



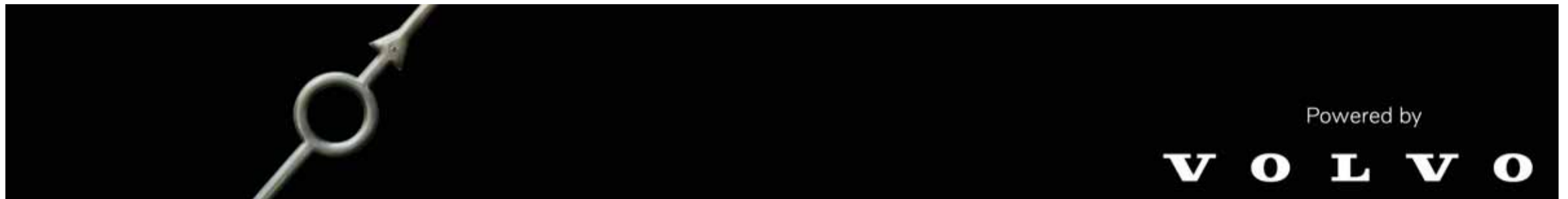
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Kuwait imposes partial curfew amid 12 new coronavirus cases

Expat teachers to get exit permits • Shutdown extended • Violators face harsh penalties



KUWAIT: A photo taken early yesterday shows a deserted street in Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Kuwait imposed a nationwide curfew starting yesterday from 5 pm until 4 am to fight the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, state news agency KUNA said, citing the Cabinet. Kuwait, which went into virtual lockdown on Thursday, has taken some of the most drastic steps in the region to curb the virus' spread. The country, which has reported 188 cases of the virus, said violators of the curfew could face up to three years in jail or fines of up to KD 10,000. The National Guard will aid police in imposing the curfew.

The decision was made due to "some manifestations of non-compliance with precautionary measures," Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh said, according to KUNA. The Cabinet also decided to extend a suspension of government departments and private companies for two weeks. It had already announced on Thursday an extension to a suspension of schools and universities until Aug 4 - the first among its neighbors to impose such lengthy education closures to limit the spread of the sometimes deadly disease. Saleh, also Minister of State for

Cabinet Affairs, said the civil defense committee will issue IDs to persons working in vital sectors so they can move during the curfew.

Education Minister Saud Al-Harbi issued orders to departments in his ministry yesterday to prepare and issue exit permits for expat teachers so they can leave the country. In a statement to KUNA, Harbi said that this measure comes in response and understanding of the psychological and social conditions of foreign teachers during such circumstances. He noted that after preparing the exit permits, a delivery mechanism will be determined according to certain procedures. Last week, the minister announced that administrative and educational staff will resume work at the secondary level on Aug 4 of this summer.

Kuwait yesterday confirmed 12 new coronavirus cases during the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 188. During a press conference, Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad pointed out that four patients were in close contact with persons who had travelled to the

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Coronavirus deaths surge past 13,000

ROME: Nearly one billion people around the world were confined to their homes yesterday, as the coronavirus death toll crossed 13,000 and factories were shut in worst-hit Italy after another single-day fatalities record. The raging pandemic has forced lockdowns in 35 countries, disrupting lives, travel and businesses as governments scramble to shut borders and unleash hundreds of billions in emergency measures to avoid a widespread virus-fueled economic meltdown.

More than 300,000 infections have been confirmed worldwide, with the situa-

tion increasingly grim in Italy where the death toll spiked to more than 4,800 - over a third of the global total. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced a closure of all non-essential factories in a late-night TV address on Saturday. The Mediterranean nation of 60 million is now the epicenter of the disease, which first emerged in central China late last year before marching out to the rest of the world.

Italy has now reported more deaths than mainland China and third-placed Iran combined, and it has a death rate of 8.6 percent among confirmed COVID-19 infections - significantly higher than in most other countries. Across the Atlantic, more than a third of Americans were adjusting to life in various phases of lockdown, including in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Other parts of the United States are expected to ramp up restric-

tions as well.

"This is a time of shared national sacrifice, but also a time to treasure our loved ones," US President Donald Trump said. "We're going to have a great victory." As world leaders have vowed to fight the pandemic, the number of deaths and infections has continued to rise, especially in Europe - now the main coronavirus hotspot. Spain reported a 32 percent spike in new deaths on Saturday, with Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez warning that the nation needs to prepare for "very hard days ahead."

Fatalities in France jumped to 562 as police officials said helicopters and drones were being deployed to boost the government's attempts to keep people in their homes. The unprecedented measures to counter the spread of COVID-19 have shredded the international sports calendar, and pressure is mounting on Olympic

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BAGHDAD: A volunteer disinfects a shop in the Iraqi capital's Bayaa neighborhood on Saturday. — AFP

Religion in the Mideast adapts to coronavirus

JERUSALEM: In the Middle East, where the three main monotheistic faiths shape daily life, the coronavirus pandemic has seen religious leaders support constraints unthinkable just a few weeks ago. Top Islamic clerics in the region and in majority-Muslim North Africa have endorsed the closure of mosques to avoid large gatherings where the risk of contamination could be high.

The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, custodian of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - believed by Christians to house Christ's tomb - has told congregations to receive communion in their hand, instead of on their tongue. And Israel's chief Sephardic rabbi, Yitzhak Yosef, issued a decree ordering followers to keep their mobile phones on through Shabbat so they can receive urgent information about the COVID-19 disease.

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India one-day curfew to test virus defenses

NEW DELHI: Millions of Indians went into lockdown yesterday as the country brought most of its vast railway network to a halt in a bid to slow the spread of the deadly coronavirus. Most domestic flights were grounded and shops shut their doors for the 14-hour curfew that is designed to test the country's ability to fight the pandemic. Normally bustling streets in the capital New Delhi and financial hub of Mumbai were mostly deserted as the shutdown began at 7:00 am (0130 GMT). Incoming international flights have also been banned.

While the lockdown was not mandatory, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged the population of 1.3 billion to help prepare for the challenges ahead. "Let us all be a part of this curfew, which will add tremendous strength to the fight against COVID-19 menace," Modi tweeted. "Stay indoors and stay healthy." Health ministry official Lav Agarwal said the government is seeking "unity in isolation".

Only a handful of people ventured into Delhi's popular Lodhi Gardens park which security guard



MUMBAI: Police prepare to stop a car during a nationwide one-day curfew yesterday. — AFP

Jaiveer Singh said was usually packed. "If this helps stop the spread, then the government can think of extending it for two to three more days," Singh said. The curfew - which some see as a rehearsal for a longer lockdown - comes as the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in India surges past 320, with five deaths reported so far.

But experts say a lack of testing could be hiding

the true scale of the health crisis in the country. Testing for the virus has been expanded to private laboratories and will now include asymptomatic people who have had contact with confirmed cases. In a sign of growing anxiety, Indian Railways, one of the world's biggest networks, cancelled all services except suburban and goods trains until March 31.

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Kuwait Cabinet warns anew of gatherings over COVID-19

Kuwait extends obligatory work suspension by further two weeks



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah chairs the cabinet's extraordinary meeting on Saturday. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Cabinet on Saturday called once more on all citizens and residents to steer away from gatherings to stave off coronavirus outbreak. It also urged everyone to follow all guidelines and decisions issued by concerned state agencies in order to avert relevant hazards. This came during an extraordinary cabinet meeting held at Seif Palace under the chairmanship of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. At the onset of the meeting, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled quoted His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah as having directed and backed all precautionary measures in this regard. The prime minister spoke highly of the dedication, earnestness and constructive cooperation of all state agencies in their efforts to fight the novel coronavirus. He also asked all ministers to keep doing their great job so as to stem the tide of this contagious disease and ensure that citizens and residents safe and sound.



Curfew from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am

any shop or market that includes a gathering of people would be closed. The cabinet, further, decided to allow online selling and buying operations and to only allow foodstuff stores to be open. In addition, a team of specialists from relevant state agencies will be created in order to offer technological help to ministries and departments in their fight against the COVID-19. As for overseas citizens, the ministries of foreign affairs and health, along with other concerned bodies, are responsible for setting out priorities for the repatriation of citizens from abroad, depending on the country's available health capabilities. Aided by the

Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah on the latest developments of the virus, citing the World Health Organization's latest update on virus infections and fatalities worldwide. Bearing the ministerial response team's recommendations in mind, the cabinet decided to entrust the Ministry of Finance with running quarantine centers only to enable the Ministry of Health to better focus on its main mission of containing the disease. It also warned that

Latest developments

Then, the ministers listened to a briefing from



National Guard, the Ministry of Interior will enforce a country-wide curfew as of Sunday from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am until further notice.

Work suspension

The Kuwaiti cabinet has decided to extend the suspension of work in all ministries and state agencies by two additional weeks, said Government Spokesman Tareq Al-Mezrem Saturday. The decision means that all civil servants, who have been on mandatory holiday from March 12 to 26, will resume

work on April 12, the spokesman told a press conference following the extraordinary cabinet meeting. The move is mainly intended to rein in the spread of the novel coronavirus, known as COVID-19, in the country, he added. In addition, the cabinet decided to shut down all shops and central markets, except for foodstuff stores, he said, asking Kuwait Municipality to determine other necessary activities that need to be excluded. The spokesman restated that the country-wide partial curfew would be put in place as of Sunday from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am. — KUNA



Cabinet members attend the meeting.

Kuwait Foreign Minister meets emergency committee

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah and his Deputy Khaled Al-Jarallah met Friday with members of the ministry's emergency committee to discuss conditions of Kuwaiti citizens abroad. The meeting, held at Sheikh Saud Al-Nasser Diplomatic Institute, touched upon diplomatic missions' measures to follow up affairs of Kuwaiti citizens and guarantee their safety, a foreign ministry statement said.

In other news, Kuwait Embassy in Prague said Saturday it was following up conditions of Kuwaiti citizens in the Czech Republic and Croatia in order to meet their needs until their return to Kuwait. Ambassador Rashed Al-Hajri said an emergency team was contacting all Kuwaiti citizens in the Czech Republic to know their needs. He said the citizens would be staying in a hotel in Prague and would be provided with everything they needed, including medical care. Hajri urged citizens in the Czech Republic of Croatia to contact the embassy whenever they needed help at: +420777576420. He urged them to abide by the government authorities' instructions related to the coronavirus for the sake of their wellbeing.

In the meantime, Kuwait Embassy in Vienna called on citizens in Austria to comply with Austrian authorities' regulations, which aimed at curbing spread of coronavirus. The Embassy reminded citizens that the

Austrian authorities would impose fines and take legal action against any person violating the restrictions. The Austrian authorities, said the embassy, banned gathering of more than five people, stay indoors, keeping a one-meter distance in queues and stay in home quarantine when asked. It urged citizens to contact the embassy at following number if they need help: +436641666667, +431405564628.

Meanwhile, Kuwait Embassy in Romania affirmed yesterday its readiness to provide all means of comfort to citizens here until their safe return back home during the coming period. Kuwait's Ambassador to Romania Talal Al-Hajri said that since the beginning of the spread of coronavirus the embassy has formed a team to follow up on the situation of Kuwaiti citizens. The embassy has allocated a temporary residence for citizens in a hotel in the center of the capital, Bucharest, until their return to the country while providing their necessary requirements in accordance with the directives of the political leadership, headed by His Highness the Amir, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The Ambassador urged all citizens in Romania and Moldova who did not register their names to communicate with the embassy, calling on citizens to comply with the Romanian authorities' regulations that aims at curbing the spread of coronavirus. The ambassador also called on the Kuwaiti citizens to contact the Consular Affairs Department in case of inquiries and emergency on the following number: +40746151512.

Separately, Kuwait's Ambassador in Amman Aziz Al-Daihani had urged citizens in Jordan Friday to abide by a curfew the government planned to impose as of 7:00 am on Saturday. Daihani underlined importance of abiding by the instructions of the Jordanian government for the sake of the safety of citizens.



KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah and his Deputy Khaled Al-Jarallah meet with members of the ministry's emergency committee to discuss conditions of Kuwaiti citizens abroad. — KUNA

He said citizens who need help to contact the following numbers: +96265605135, +96265605136, +96265605137. They can also use WhatsApp with this number: +962798376226. The Jordanian government decided to impose the curfew nationwide as part of the Kingdom's quest to contain spread of coronavirus.

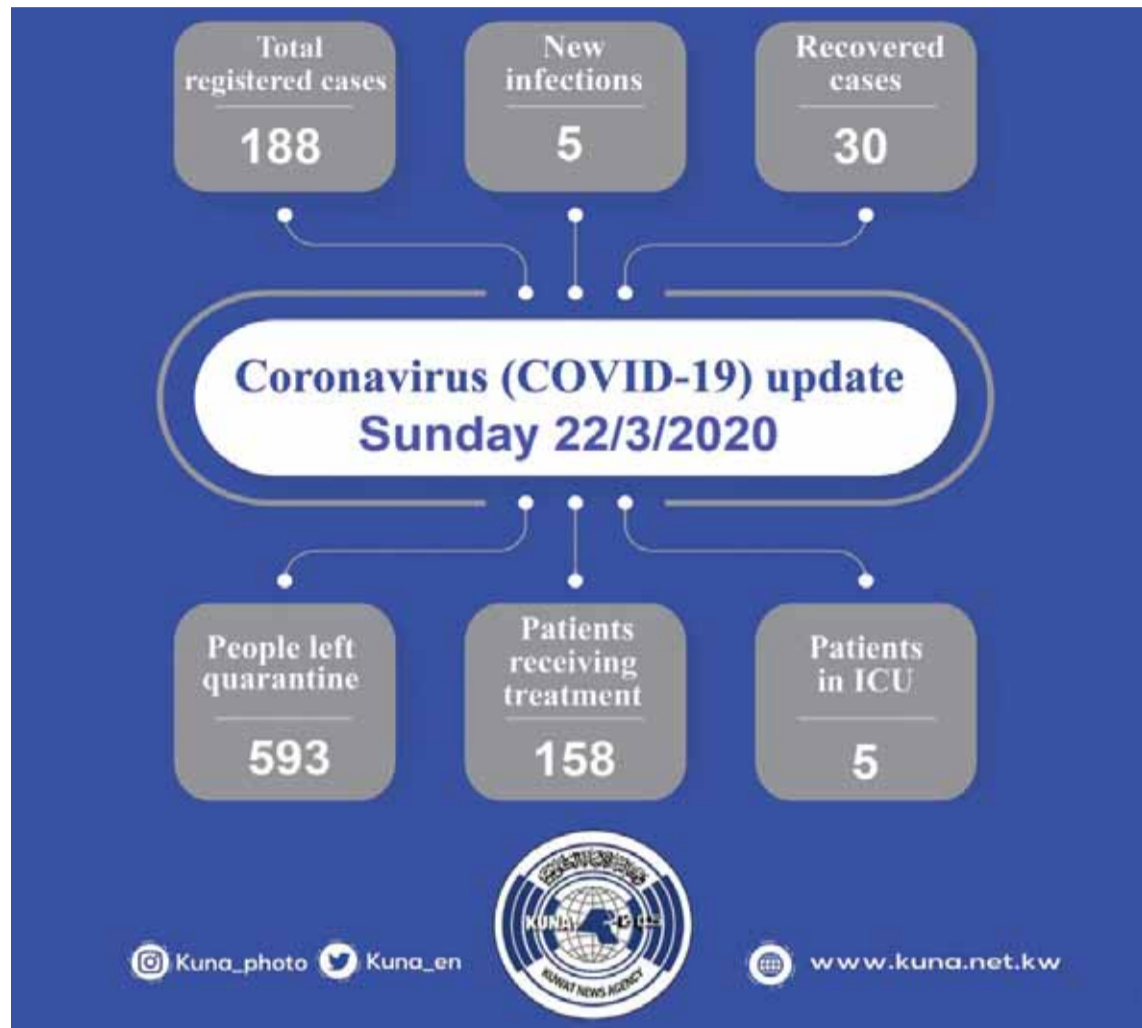
Jordanian Minister of Information Ajmad Al-Adhayleh, announcing the government decision at a news conference, said the curfew would mean all

shops should be closed in the entire country. He said the government would announce on Tuesday timings in which people could leave their homes to buy necessary needs. The curfew excluded persons who should be at their working place in vital sectors. People violating the curfew will be sent to prison for a year maximum, said Adhayleh. Jordan already closed border crossings and public transportation, suspended air travel, and closed malls and markets. — KUNA

Local

Kuwait confirms 12 new coronavirus cases, total number rises to 188

Three patients recovered, total recovery 30 cases: Health Minister



KUWAIT: Kuwait yesterday confirmed 12 new coronavirus cases during the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 188, said the Health Ministry. During a press conference, the ministry's spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad pointed out that four patients were in close contact with persons who had traveled to the UK, two Kuwaitis and two Filipino residents, one was in contact with a patient who recently arrived from Egypt. He added that the sixth case related to a Kuwaiti citizen recently arrived from Brazil, noting that the rest of the cases, their details will be revealed later.

Meanwhile, Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said yesterday that three coronavirus cases have recovered, two cases that belong to Kuwaiti fe-



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

Medical supplies arrive in Kuwait

male and male citizens, and a third to a Spanish resident, bringing the number of cases that recovered in the country to 30 cases. Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah added that laboratory and radiological tests showed that these three cases were cured from the virus. The minister stated that the three patients to be transferred to rehabilitation wards in the assigned hospital, in preparation for discharge within the next two days.

In other news, the Ministry of Health has received medical equipment and supplies that would boost

the strategic storage in the country thus boost capabilities of curbing spread of coronavirus. The Ministry is keen on providing necessary medical supplies and equipment to better cope with the current situation, the Ministry's Assistant Undersecretary for Medical Supplies Abdullah Al-Bader said in a statement. He was speaking after a plane loaded with the supplies arrived in Kuwait from China. Bader said the ministry was currently focusing on the return of Kuwaiti citizens who would be tested at the airports before entering the country. The Ministry of Health, he added, has a long-term plan to confront coronavirus.— KUNA

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 188 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). With the exception of five cases in critical condition, all cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while hundreds have been discharged after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 30 people have recovered completely after previously been infected with the virus, the ministry said. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested thousands of people, the overwhelming majority of them have returned from Iran. Meanwhile, Kuwait requires all expatriates who arrived from travel on March 1 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center at Hall 6 to test people for possible infection.

Precautions
Kuwait enforced a country-wide curfew as of Sunday from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am until further notice. Kuwait halted all commercial flights to and from the Gulf Arab state starting March 13 and until further notice, with the exception of cargo flights. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to April 9, with work resuming on April 12, while entities providing vital services will remain open. The government decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The government also allowed restaurants to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are lines, the distance must be at least one meter between people.

State departments have been on high alert to take precautions against the potential spread of the virus. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has taken measures to make sure that facial masks, hand sanitizers and other goods remain accessible to the public. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended classes for March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs): first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29. In the meantime, the Civil Service Commission suspended the biometric fingerprint system for staff attendance until further notice.

Visa suspension

Kuwait suspended issuing entry permits and visas unless those issued through diplomatic missions. Previously, authorities have stopped issuing all kinds of visas (visit, work, etc) for Egyptian nationals, while allowing those who already have a visa to enter only after they take tests in Cairo before coming to Kuwait. In the meantime, Iraq has suspended flights from Kuwait, whereas Saudi Arabia stopped issuing umrah visas for all nationalities as a precautionary measures.

The Civil Service Commission directed all government agencies to bar employees placed under any form of quarantine from resuming work. The ban is applicable on Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti employees. Salary payments will continue as usual to all Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti employees under all kinds of compulsory quarantine.

Types of quarantine

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

Hotlines

- The Ministry of Health has set the following hotlines to receive inquiries about the coronavirus 24/7: 24970967 - 96049698 - 99048619.

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

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

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Curfew-breakers to be jailed, fined, Interior Ministry warns

Curfew due to non-compliance with instructions to stay indoors



KUWAIT: Photos taken early yesterday morning show deserted streets in Kuwait amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Anyone caught breaching the curfew decided Saturday evening will be jailed for up to three years and fined KD 10,000 pursuant to Civil Defense Law, warned the interior minister. The warning was given by Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh during a press conference held following an extraordinary cabinet meeting earlier Saturday.

He added that the military is on standby to help

security forces in putting the curfew in place, quoting the cabinet as having tasked the National Guard with aiding the Ministry of Interior in this regard. He stated that the curfew was decided as a result of non-compliance with health guidelines and instructions aimed at averting gatherings. The minister noted that he would relieve violators of residency law of any fine so that they could leave the country immediately.

The cabinet had decided Saturday to impose an

11-hour curfew due to non-compliance with Ministry of Health's instructions to stay indoors, Deputy Premier and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh announced Saturday. Saleh, addressing a news conference after the cabinet meeting, said the curfew would be imposed from 5:00 pm until 4:00 am. He meanwhile said a public holiday, due to end on March 26, would be extended for two weeks.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said a strength-

ened health system would undoubtedly make it easy for overseas citizens to return home at an early date. Speaking at the press conference following the cabinet meeting on response to the novel coronavirus, the minister reassured that his ministry had worked out a blueprint to evacuate citizens abroad. Urging everyone to take the matter seriously, the minister said the evacuation plan would give top priority to patients in critical situation, old people, minors and people with disabilities. — KUNA



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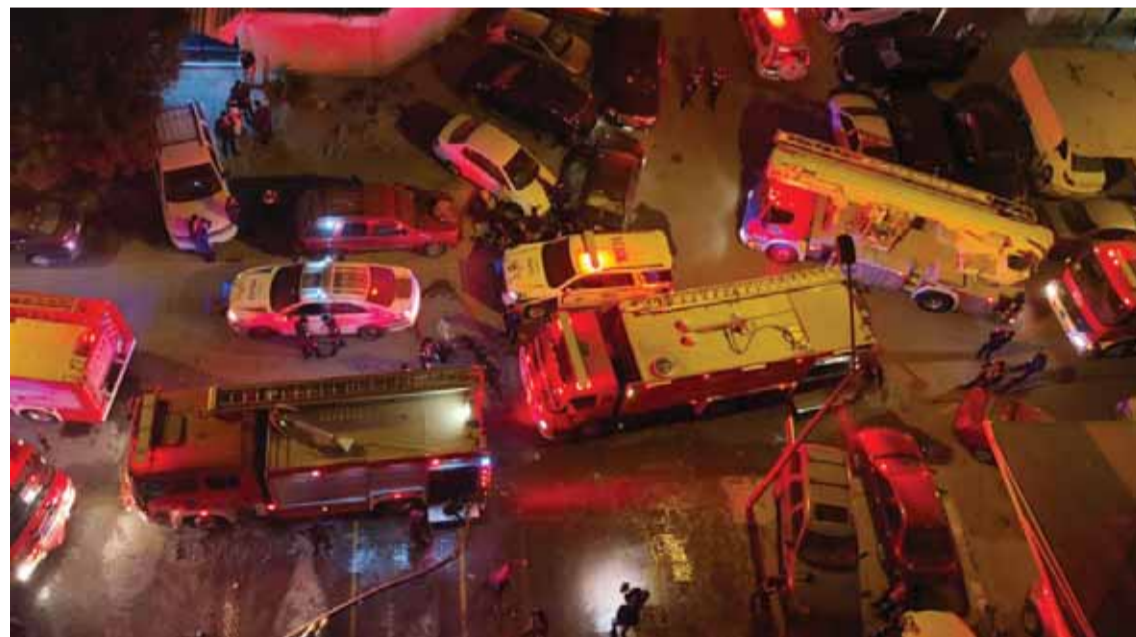
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Child hurt in 10-story Hawally building blaze



By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: A fire was reported in a 10-story Hawally building Saturday night. Firemen from the Hawally, Salmiya, Ardhiya and Qurain fire stations responded

to an emergency call. They put out the fire after evacuating the building. A child sustained slight burns and was taken to hospital. Kuwait Fire Service Directorate (KFS) Deputy Director General for Fire Fighting Sector Major General Jamal Albulahees was on hand.



Local

Public agree curfew important to protect people's lives

Housemaids wary of extra work pressure during 5:00 pm to 4:00 am curfew

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Because of the sudden curfew imposed by the Kuwaiti government, people came to work early yesterday and adjusted their schedules according to the curfew timings. The daily curfew from March 22 will be from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am, and violators will be penalized with three years in jail and a fine of KD 10,000. "This is the right thing to do. I pray that it will be imposed in other countries too that have a high mortality rate of coronavirus. They should be very strict about the matter because we are talking about the lives of people," said Mustafa, 65, a Palestinian working in Shuwaikh Industrial Area.

"I have lived all my life here in Kuwait and love this country. I have never witnessed such a death toll from a virus. We really need to protect ourselves and take this very seriously. Thanks to Kuwait for its relentless efforts to safeguard not just citizens, but the lives of everyone, including expatriates like us," he told Kuwait Times.

"Why did we need to reach this stage? If we all had followed the regulations imposed earlier, probably we

would've been spared this curfew. Many people were still gathering outside their homes and walking around as if nothing had been imposed. The government had called for social distancing, but this was not being followed. Now maybe they will be compelled to go home

lies? I pray that COVID-19 will be completely eradicated, so this curfew will not stay for long and we can all go back to our normal lives," said Stanley, a 45-year-old human resource manager.

There are some who are not very happy with the curfew. "God bless us housemaids! Hopefully we can still rest because all members of the (employer's) family will be home by 5 pm. This means many things to us - we don't care whether it's a curfew or not because we are always at home and observing a curfew the whole year round. I thank God if my boss gives me one day off a month - I am always in a state of curfew, so it is nothing to us," said Joy, a housemaid working in Andalus.

"I hope this curfew will serve as a lesson to them that we also need to go out and socialize with people so we can feel that we are human too and not keep us inside their homes the whole year," she remarked.

"For me it's okay, but the timing is too early for a curfew. But I am a nurse, so we are exempted," said Tony, a middle-aged Filipino who lives in Farwaniya with his family. Ashraf, an Egyptian, said the penalties are ridiculous. "Who can pay KD 10,000? This is too much! It's way beyond the capacity of many people in Kuwait."

“This is the right thing to do”

early and stop socializing outside their homes," said Sujin, 57-year-old Indian who works at the airport.

"My deepest concern is about the workers. Many shops will be closed, there will be no economic activities, and probably private companies will no longer pay salaries to these people. How can they feed their fami-

Ooredoo Kuwait reaffirms full support to govt

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Kuwait, the first to launch innovative digital services in Kuwait has reaffirmed its full support of the government and its entities in light of the Coronavirus outbreak in the country and to ensure that customers are staying home as per Government directives. The company reaffirmed its support during a meeting held with Salem Al-Uthainah - Director General of Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA) and the Chief Executive Officers of the three telecommunication companies in Kuwait. Fadi Kawar, Acting Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operating Officer at Ooredoo Kuwait expressed his thanks to Uthainah and the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority for their cooperation and for providing the telecommunication companies with extra bandwidth and services. Ooredoo Kuwait will provide customers with free 5GB internet and free calls for one month starting on Sunday March 22, 2020.

Kawar asserted Ooredoo Kuwait's firm commitment to consistently be present at the forefront of all emergency situations in Kuwait. Kawar stated "We continuously seek to fulfill the needs of our customers, and being online and staying connected at all times remains essentially important to all our customers. Customers expect uninterrupted connection and strong network coverage while staying indoors as directed by the government. Ooredoo is always evaluating peak internet data usage these days to stay ahead of that demand."

It is worth mentioning that Ooredoo Kuwait recently gifted its customers in Ministries and Governmental Organizations which include the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, Civil Defense, Kuwait Police, Kuwait Airways and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation free internet valid throughout the month of March in appreciation for their great efforts during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) situation in the country.



Fadi Kawar

Ooredoo Kuwait also launched its 'Be Safe. Be Home. Be Online' campaign, featuring an array of digital offers and services designed to support customers and to ensure they are well connected and informed during the Coronavirus outbreak in the country.

The digital offers and services provided by Ooredoo Kuwait include subscription to any Ooredoo Surprise offer on My Ooredoo App, enjoying the best music, series, movies, and games, recharging online, joining ANA and free SIM delivery to customers' doorsteps, and amazing benefits from Shamel. Customers can also view Ooredoo's services as well as exclusive offers and their subscription data online through the MyOoredoo application and the Company website Ooredoo.com.kw in addition to contacting our call center through 121 around the clock for all enquiries and services.

Ooredoo Kuwait reaffirms its keenness to adhere to all instructions issued by the official authorities in Kuwait related to the current situation, confirming its cooperation and its complete readiness to implement the procedures followed in this regard during the coming period.



KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality trucks prepared before embarking in a cleaning campaign in Farwaniya.

Burial timings from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: In a bid to limit the spread of COVID-19 and in compliance with health authorities' regulations to protect public health, the funerals department manager Faisal Al-Awadhi issued a directive limiting access to cemeteries for the deceased's relatives only, and burial timings will be limited from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm. Awadhi added that all bodies will be prepared for burial immediately on arrival, nobody will be allowed into the transport van with the body and that only the main cemetery gates will be open.

Hawally inspection

Kuwait Municipality said that accompanied by joint committee members, Hawally inspectors inspected various stores throughout the governorate

to make sure they all comply with municipal regulations and the precautionary measures taken to limit the spread of COVID-19. In this regard, the emergency team leader Ahmad Ramadan said 91 stores were inspected, resulting in closing down two restaurants, an accessories store, a barbershop, a mobile phone shop, a florist and a beauty salon.

Farwaniya leaning

Kuwait Municipality deputy director for Farwaniya and Mubarak Al-Kabeer affairs Ammar Al-Ammar reviewed COVID-19 related efforts exerted by inspectors over the past week, noting that the teams had issued 587 warning notices, closed 635 stores and cafes, filed 302 citations, closed 10 amusement centers, dispersed 293 gatherings and cleaned and decontaminated 28,827 garbage containers.

Further, Ammar added that Farwaniya municipal inspectors cleaned and decontaminated 23,557 garbage containers, issued 546 warning notices, closed 562 stores and cafes, filed 302 citations and dispersed 293 gatherings. Ammar also noted that Mubarak Al-Kabeer municipal inspectors had cleaned and decontaminated 5,270 garbage containers, closed 73 stores and cafes, closed 10 amusement centers and issued 41 warning notices.

Legalese

COVID-19 Employee Rights



By Attorney Fajer Ahmed

This is a tough time for all of us. Physically, mentally, and emotionally. I would like to start off with a big thank you from the bottom of my heart for everyone that stayed at home, the doctors that had to work in hospitals, every police officer on duty, every cleaner, driver that delivers goods, bank and stock exchange employees that still have to go to work, journalists keeping us informed, mothers and fathers that are being teachers to their kids, trainers that are posting live training sessions on Instagram, and every other person that just continues to spread positivity in an uncertain time.

It is okay to be afraid, but let us use this fear as inspiration to shift our lives to make the best of what we do have. Fear is a tool that gets us to reconsider where we are going. Kuwait, you have amazed the world.

It is okay also to be confused right now over your job position and status moving forward, and I am not surprised at the amount of questions that my team has to answer from employees. Here are the most common questions.

Cut in half

Question: My employer has forced us to work part time right now at the restaurant and has cut my salary in half, because I am doing half the hours. Is this legal? They have also changed my work.

Answer: An employer cannot change your salary or change your job position from full time to part time. An employer does have the right to move you to another store location, be absolutely flexible, it is hard times for everyone, including a business owner.

With that said, according to Article 28 though, the different work you are requested to do should be in nature with your job position. "The employer may not assign to the worker any task that is not consistent with nature of the work stated in the contract or that is unsuitable to the worker's qualifications and experience on the basis of which the contract was signed with him."

Forced leave

Question: My employer is forcing me on paid leave as I have accumulated leave for the last three years and I have not taken leave, can he do that?

Answer: Yes absolutely, an employer can ask you to take leave if you have accumulated it over the years, especially if it is in the companies policies that no accumulation is allowed. Most companies do have a policy for that. As for your leave days of this year, I know this might not seem fair at all, and my heart goes out to all the expats that are in Kuwait that have been working for years and not taking time off to see their families. This is debatable in the legal world, I believe that the employee can only ask you to take your paid leave right now for this year, only if the company is in absolute distress, and this needs to be proven, i.e. preventing bankruptcy. This will be to your benefit as well, as this may mean that you have a stable job when all of this is over.

Visa expiration

Question: My visa is about to expire and I cannot renew it. I do not want to be in violation and be deported.

Answer: Let me make it clear that the government is asking you to stay at home, so unless you are one of the minority that has to go to work, stay at home and no one will deport you for your visa being expired. Also the government is doing an amazing job and is being lenient right now with visas, as they know you cannot renew them.

Sick leave

Question: My employer is forcing us to take sick leave, because of the virus.

Answer: Your employer cannot force you to take sick leave if the company is shutdown, if the company is operating, like a shop for example, and if you are actually sick and cannot make it, then yes these days off may be considered as sick leave.

With all of the above said, I want to make three points clear.

1. This is an unusual time, so be aware that the above may change easily in the foreseen future, as new laws or bylaws might be implemented at this time.

2. Please be flexible with your employer, discuss things with him/her and try to negotiate what is best for you.

3. Stay at home and stay safe.

For questions or queries, please email us at info@ftl-legal.com.

local spotlight

Partial curfew



By Muna Al-Fuzal

Muna@kuwaittimes.net

Kuwait imposed a partial curfew starting Sunday night and extended the suspension of work in all government institutions for an additional two weeks. The number of people that were found to be infected with the virus has increased to 188 after 12 new cases were confirmed on Sunday.

The partial curfew starts from Sunday evening at 5:00 pm until 4:00 am daily until further notice. The Ministry of Interior will apply the law to anyone who violates the curfew with a punishment up to KD 10,000 or three years in prison or deportation (for expatriates).

We are facing difficult circumstances. Some of us will remember the challenges and curfew of life in Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion and occupation. But most of our youth and many expatriates never experienced such conditions and it is easy to understand their fear, confusion and mixed feelings over the issue. I hope it will be temporary. I personally think this nightmare may last few months. We need patience and to deal with the matter day-by-day, as it comes, without panic.

Many countries around the globe have imposed a curfew and it seems that each state has its own rituals in killing the long hours of staying at home without work or schools. We have seen many videos from people in cities across Italy and Spain, where neighbors singing and play musical instruments from the balconies of their flats. Other neighbors were either clapping or cheering or singing or dancing along to the music. Another video was circulated of a family in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, who played recorded prayers. These videos show us all how to find a way through this circumstance. With time, people will accommodate their daily routine to make life enjoyable even as they cannot go outdoors or socialize like before. In even the worst of times, we are able to lift each other up and give hope for the future.

Now everyone awaits the return home of Kuwaiti students and citizens from abroad. Once they arrive they will be examined and those who are infected will be quarantined and treated. I think that after the completion of this matter, the true and correct figures of infected people will be counted. I hope that everyone will consider the situation an open vacation and enjoy the high-speed internet at all times and it may be an opportunity for more reading while doing nothing but, wait for this nightmare to end.

Virus won't affect oil production

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) CEO Emad Al-Sultan stressed the company's keenness on avoiding all possible effects of the spread of COVID-19 in its administrative and oil operations and meeting the state's commitments towards the local and international markets. In a statement addressing company employees, Sultan said: "The company has adopted all measures necessary to ensure the continuation of work with regards to production, groups and related teams at all its facilities in order to have the company, which is always ready to face various challenges, perform its duties to the best levels."

Sultan pointed out that KOC had set emergency plans needed to get through this critical situation and any possible complications through combining the efforts of all groups and employees. Sultan also stressed since day one of the crisis, KOC has been coordinating with relevant state bodies including Ministry of Health (MoH) and has taken precautionary measures to fight COVID-19 under the supervision of the company's MoH-accredited medical, health, safety and environment teams working according to MoH and international standard health and safety measures.



China scrambling to curb rise in imported coronavirus cases

Crisis-hit Venezuelans turn to homemade remedies to fight virus



BANGKOK: Father Paul Nettham (center), wearing a face mask as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, greets devotees after a mass at the Holy Redeemer church in Bangkok yesterday. —AFP

Thailand virus cases rocket to 600

Fears of a full-blown crisis amid pandemic

BANGKOK: Thailand's confirmed coronavirus cases rose by a third to nearly 600, the kingdom announced yesterday, as fears of a full-blown crisis take hold in a country largely spared until now. Thailand's health ministry announced the spike was mainly in the capital, but warned residents of Bangkok not to leave and risk spreading the virus around the country.

"We would like you to stay home. Do not travel around the country," said health ministry official Taweessin Visanuvothin. Southeast Asia has so far been spared the worst of the pan-

demical that has swept the world, confining nearly one billion to their homes and killing more than 13,000. But that could be about to change. With a boxing stadium and night club among the likely transmission sites, Bangkok has now imposed tough restrictions.

Virtually all public spaces have been shuttered, from shopping malls and beauty parlours to golf courses and swimming pools. Residents packed out supermarkets over the weekend to stockpile food, fearing a full lockdown. Transport links are also slowly being severed. A frontier

crossing point near northern city Chiang Rai saw thousands of Thai and Myanmar citizens rushing to get home before land border closures came into effect.

Bangkok Airways and Thai AirAsia have cancelled all international flights while Thai Lion Air has grounded its fleet entirely. Yet elsewhere in the tropical tourist destination, life continued unabated with beaches in Pattaya and Phuket thronged with sun-seekers. One doctor at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn hospital warned tougher measures were needed—even calling for three weeks of martial

law to force people to self-isolate.

The nation is "on the verge of a crisis" and heading for the Italian model, a doctor told AFP, adding hospitals are already straining under the pressure. Meanwhile Vietnam on Saturday imposed a blanket ban on all foreigners entering the country, even though the number of confirmed cases still hovers below 100. In under-developed Myanmar and Laos, there is increasing scepticism about claims of zero cases as fears grow for the their decrepit healthcare systems and fragile economies. —AFP

Bars closed? House parties and happy hours move online

LOS ANGELES: Coronavirus lockdown or not, Amaya Howard plans to unwind after a hard day's work by sharing a few glasses of wine with her friends. But with bars closing across the United States, they have started meeting online via Houseparty - one of several group video apps doing a roaring trade during the pandemic.

"The idea came about of doing a happy hour - we just get on the app and just drink wine and talk," she said. "Mostly it's about a lot of randomness, but occasionally someone will say, 'I just can't believe how crazy what's going on is.'" She is not alone. Downloads of similar apps - where each person who logs in to a group chat appears in their own "window" on the screen of a phone, tablet or computer - have gone through the roof.

Just this month downloads of Houseparty, which was highly popular with teens a cou-

ple of years ago, have surged tenfold to 210,000 per day, according to Apptopia. Others such as Zoom, used mainly for remote working, and Google Hangouts, Skype and Rave have also seen upticks. For Esmee Lavalette, a Dutch film student in Los Angeles, the lockdown has presented a chance to hang out with friends back in the Netherlands - although the time difference has necessitated some "daytime drinking."

"They always have a weekly drinks nights, but now since everything's canceled, they decided to do it on Houseparty," she said. "And now for the first time in like a year-and-a-half, I could join them. So I was drunk at like 2:00 pm." The call ended when the night grew too late in Europe - and Lavalette returned to her homework. Even drinks for her graduation, which was set to take place this week, are now being shifted to cyberspace. "I still have a lot of beer left-over so that's what I'm gonna drink," Lavalette said. "And some vodka."

'Girl's night'

As well as a chance to catch up and blow off some steam, users say the apps are good for their mental health in these anxious times. Rachel Chadwick, a local government worker in Leeds, England, has struggled with anxiety and depression. "I'm quite

extroverted... so obviously this self-isolating is really difficult for me," she said. Chadwick and her friends usually meet for a "girls night" once a month, which is now being played out on the app. "Tomorrow night we're doing a little pub quiz where each of us has a category, but we all have drinks and snacks," she said. "We can keep it light-hearted so you don't feel like you're losing the plot."

One of the friends has "borrowed" a whiteboard from work to keep scores on. The Houseparty app also features built-in games such as trivia, drawing and wordplay. This is a draw for Fiana Liaudat, a Spanish teacher from Argentina living in North Carolina. She and fellow teachers dotted across the state would typically explore bars together, or meet at someone's home to play board games before the virus. "For us, the app means we can continue, but on our phones," she said.

Up until four

"The weather is perfect here and the night is warm, so I can imagine being on the balcony with a beer playing with them," she said. "But I have to make a new online shop now!" The surge in video group chats has even presented the opportunity to make new friends. Howard, now back home in



LOS ANGELES: Homeless people make shelters on the sidewalk in front of the Midnight Mission at Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, California. Officials in California are scrambling to protect the state's huge homeless population from COVID-19 amid warnings that should the virus spread within that community it could prove impossible to contain. —AFP

Dallas, used to chat with strangers through travel meet-up apps while living in Philadelphia, where she worked with non-profits. They recently logged into Houseparty where they all met for the first

time face-to-face. "We were probably on it until four in the morning, five in the morning... everybody had their own drinks," she said. "They definitely don't feel like strangers to me now." —AFP

Flying roses: Drone fetes Lebanon mothers despite coronavirus

JOUNIEH: In a quiet Lebanese town under lockdown over the novel coronavirus, a drone buzzed towards a balcony on Saturday to deliver a red rose to a mother grinning in surprise. The COVID-19 pandemic may have put a damper on Mother's Day in Lebanon this year, but three students have come up with a new service to celebrate the occasion without flouting social distancing restrictions. Down in the street in the coastal town of Jounieh, 18-year-old Christopher Ibrahim texts a teenager who has ordered a flower drop-off for his mother, asking him to bring the family onto the balcony.

He slips a single rose in a ring hanging under the aircraft and it lifts off into the air to carry the flower to its intended recipient. "It's Mother's Day and everything's closed," said the engineering student, wearing a light blue face mask. For almost a week, most Lebanese have been ordered to remain at home to stem the spread of COVID-19. The airport has closed and all non-essential businesses have been told to shutter. Lebanon has recorded 206 cases of the novel coronavirus so far, and counted four deaths.

"I wanted to think of something that would enable people make their mothers happy in the safest way - without there being contact with anyone," Ibrahim said. Ibrahim, who has filmed weddings using a drone and also volunteers for the Lebanese Red Cross, decided on the idea of an airborne rose. "I thought if it was delivered by drone, there would be zero contact," he said. But beyond cheering up mothers in lockdown, Ibrahim says the unconventional flower delivery service

also aims to support medical workers battling the pandemic.

"Everything we make from this project will go to the Red Cross," he said. Each rose delivery costs between 10,000 and 20,000 Lebanese pounds (\$6.60-\$13 according to the official exchange rate) depending on the location. Lebanese officials fear an increase in COVID-19 cases would overwhelm local hospitals, in a country already reeling from an economic crisis and mass anti-government protests.

Lebanon has been largely quiet in recent days, although food stores have remained open and there have been some vehicles in the streets. Ministers and lawmakers have called for a full curfew, and Prime Minister Hassan Diab was expected to speak on Saturday evening. An estimated 900 million people are now confined to their homes in 35 countries around the world - two thirds by government lockdown orders, according to an AFP tally.—AFP



JOUNIEH: A woman on her balcony reaches out to catch a rose delivered to her via a drone on Mother's day, in the Lebanese coastal city of Jounieh, north of the capital Beirut yesterday, as people remain indoors in an effort to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus. —AFP

International

For some Americans, Trump's 'Chinese virus' has dark echoes

Remark plays into centuries-old stereotypes

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump's insistence on speaking of a "Chinese virus" has a dark historical precedent for some Asian Americans, who say his word choice is fueling an at times violent backlash. Speaking daily on the global coronavirus pandemic, Trump has incessantly called COVID-19 the "Chinese virus," with one photo even showing his notes in which he had crossed out clinical terms preferred by health professionals.

Asian American advocates say that such language plays into centuries-old stereotypes of the community as perpetually foreign and unclean - and signals, incorrectly, that individuals of one ethnicity are responsible for spreading illness. While US incidents appear to be fewer than in Europe, New York police said that a man last month chased and beat an Asian woman wearing a protective mask on the subway, calling her "diseased."

On Thursday, civil rights groups launched a site for Asian Americans to report bias crimes linked to the pandemic to see how widespread the problem has become. The site received 36 submissions in its first 24 hours, said Manjusha Kulkarni, executive director of the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council. She pointed to one incident where a middle school bully in the Los Angeles area punched an Asian American classmate in the head some 20 times, accusing him of carrying the coronavirus, and telling him to "go back" to China.

Kulkarni said she saw the violence as part of a wider history in the United States dating back to the "Yellow Peril," when suspicions about Asians led the United States in 1882 to ban all Chinese immigration. "I definitely think it will get worse, partly because of the president's relentless effort for weaponizing hate against communities," Kulkarni said. "He has the bully pulpit. With that comes

tremendous power. People listen to him," she said.

Caught in US-China tensions

Trump rose to power on vows to keep out Latin American and Muslim immigrants but has signaled that his intention in saying "Chinese virus" may be more about geopolitics. "It's not racist at all," he told a news conference. "It comes from China. I want to be accurate." The United States has wide-ranging tensions with China and Trump voiced anger over a Beijing official who promoted an unfounded conspiracy theory that the US military brought the virus to Wuhan, where cases were first reported.

China's foreign ministry has accused Trump of seeking to shift blame over his own response to the pandemic. Frank H Wu, a professor at the University of California Hastings College of the Law and author of "Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White," acknowledged that diseases were long given geographical names and said it was fair game to criticize Beijing's actions.

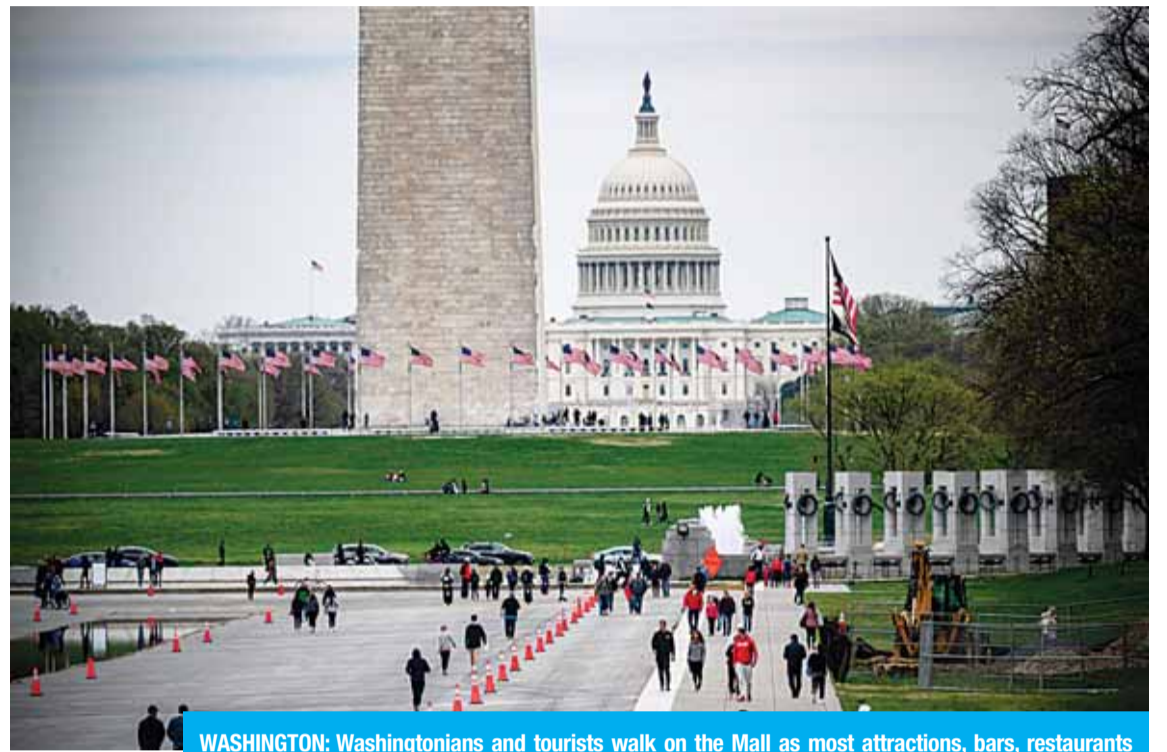
Asian Americans urged to report bias crimes



"What's important here isn't the intent. It's the consequences. And these words matter, because this is a time of incredible stress," Wu said. Wu said that Asian Americans have long been associated with dirtiness, pointing to contemporary perceptions of Chinese restaurants. "Cleanliness has always been a metaphor for whether you're a morally deserving, good individual and part of a good community," he said. "So this isn't actually about just disease and the source of disease. It's symbolic of much, much more."

Targeting Chinese over plague

In vivid examples of the association of Asian Americans with disease, authorities in 1900 sealed off the Chinatowns of both San Francisco and



WASHINGTON: Washingtonians and tourists walk on the Mall as most attractions, bars, restaurants and museums are closed during the outbreak of Coronavirus (Covid-19) in Washington, DC. —AFP

Honolulu after outbreaks of the bubonic plague. Charles McClain, a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law who has written a book on the history of Chinese Americans' efforts against discrimination, said medical professionals at the time concluded that Asians were more susceptible to the plague.

"It was a very crowded area," he said of San Francisco's Chinatown. "I don't think morbidity was any worse there than it was any other part of the city. But there was this sort of stereotype that played a large role in forming opinion." San Francisco was eventually forced to end its mandatory quarantine of Chinatown after a court agreed

that authorities needed to prove that Chinese Americans were more likely to get infected.

While no US officials are suggesting that Chinese Americans are spreading the coronavirus, Asian Americans have repeatedly borne the brunt of wider international tensions. Most notoriously, the United States detained 120,000 Japanese Americans in camps during World War II as it questioned their loyalty. Wu said that Asian Americans still struggle in not being identified as foreigners. "You can be an assimilated, English-speaking Christian who has never been to China and has high sanitary standards. People still somehow associate you with dirtiness and disease." —AFP

Prisoner swap? Iran frees French researcher

PARIS: French researcher Roland Marchal returned to Paris on Saturday after being imprisoned in Iran for over nine months, after France released an Iranian threatened with extradition to the US. "Roland has returned," his support group announced in a short message. He was taken to a military hospital near Paris for medical tests, a relative told AFP, adding that the "analyses were good." Earlier President Emmanuel Macron announced that Tehran freed Marchal after France released Iranian engineer Jallal Rohollahnejad, who is accused in the US of violating sanctions placed on the country.

Macron "is happy to announce the release of Roland Marchal, imprisoned in Iran since June 2019" but he "urges the Iranian authorities to immediately free" fellow researcher Fariba Adelkhah, his office said. France has for months demanded that Iran release Adelkhah and her partner Marchal, who were detained last year accused of plotting against national security. Their trial began in early March. Adelkhah is a citizen of both Iran and France, but Tehran does not recognize dual nationality.

Counting the cost: coronavirus puts US census in jeopardy

NEW YORK: Thousands of doors were to be knocked on, but just a few days into the start of the US census, the coronavirus pandemic has halted field operations - threatening the crucial count that is conducted every ten years. Census workers had only just begun pounding the streets to inform residents of the importance of filling out the census questionnaire when the fast-spreading epidemic led to the virtual lockdown of America's cities.

There are fears the outbreak that has killed more than 12,500 people worldwide will put the results of the costly census - which requires years of preparation - into jeopardy. The mammoth count, which began March 12, is crucial for determining how billions of dollars of federal funds are allocated and for deciding how many representatives each state gets in Congress. This week, the Census Bureau suspended all its field operations until April 1, to avoid

Coronavirus challenges US military machine

WASHINGTON: The US retreat from Afghanistan is delayed, troops have pulled back from Iraq, crucial readiness exercises are cancelled, and soldiers are confined to bases: coronavirus is handicapping the world's most powerful military. The Pentagon this week admitted that the global pandemic is a formidable foe like none other that it has confronted. Proud of its ability to

'Very happy'

Said Dehqan, lawyer for both detainees, told AFP that Adelkhah was "very happy" about the liberation of her companion. Iran has in recent months carried out prisoner exchanges with the US, Australia and Germany. The Iranian judiciary's news agency Mizan Online reported Rohollahnejad had been freed by France on Friday. Iranian state television showed images of him hugging members of his family during an emotional reunion in Tehran. He stood accused in the United States if trying to smuggle technological material into Iran in violation of US sanctions. "Thanks be to god, those days have ended," Rohollahnejad said in an interview on Iranian state television. The visibly emotional Rohollahnejad added that he had been badly treated while in detention in France. The French Court of Cassation had on March 11 approved "the request to extradite Rohollahnejad to the US, but the French government freed him, changing this decision", it said.

Coronavirus fears

Adelkhah, 60, an anthropologist and expert on Shiite Islam, faces charges of "propaganda against the system" and "colluding to commit acts against national security", according to the researchers' lawyer, said. Her colleague Marchal, 64, a specialist on East Africa, was accused of the same national security charge, the lawyer said. Their Paris-based support group and the French foreign ministry had sounded the alarm over the health of both

human contact, and said it is considering postponing the census's final date of July 31.

'Serious challenge'

"That date can and will be adjusted if necessary as the situation evolves in order to achieve a complete and accurate count," it said in a statement. For the first time, the census - which was last conducted on 2010 - can be completed online, as well as by phone or email. But face-to-face contact is required to count about a quarter of the US population of 327 million, according to census expert Terri Ann Lowenthal. "This is a very serious challenge to an already challenged census," Lowenthal told AFP, referring to the suspension of the fieldwork. Other challenges include holding the count during a noisy election campaign and the government's attempt to include a citizenship question, which the Supreme Court struck down, she said.

Thousands of census workers will be required to count people living on the streets and in shelters, migrant workers, nursing home residents and those who live in mobile homes: anyone who may not have received the form in the mail. They will also have to knock at non-responding addresses, which usually

project force to the furthest corners of the globe and to react instantly to any threat, the US military has been forced to curb operations and promote social distancing to ensure its two million-plus active and reserve fighting force, along with hundreds of thousands of civilian employees, stay healthy.

The usually crowded halls of the Pentagon have thinned, with thousands told to work from home - a shift that has introduced new security challenges. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and his deputy secretary, David Norquist, and their staffs are no longer meeting in person, to ensure at least one national leader and his team stays healthy. Despite dozens of coronavirus cases striking military personnel on bases and at least three on naval ships, Esper said this week that



A handout photo taken on August 31, 2015 and made available on March 21, 2020 by Sciences Po shows French researcher Roland Marchal. — AFP

detainees-Adelkhah went on hunger strike for 49 days and Marchal's health is said to be deteriorating.

The support group has repeatedly said that the two are innocent of the charges. "We welcome with relief the arrival of Roland Marchal in Paris after nearly nine months of arbitrary detention in very difficult conditions, but only half of the path has been taken," said Jean-Francois Bayart, a member of the committee and a professor at the Geneva-based Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. —AFP



WASHINGTON: Washingtonians and tourists walk around the tidal basin to see this year's Cherry Blossom's despite the outbreak of Coronavirus, COVID-19, and the social distancing recommendations by the authorities. —AFP

comprise around ten percent of the population. "They might have difficulty retaining enough census takers who are willing to knock on doors, if the spread of the virus doesn't slow down," said Lowenthal. —AFP

there was no reduction in the readiness of US troops to respond to threats. "Mission number one for the United States military remains ensuring that the American people, the country and our interests abroad are protected. I can assure the American people we are well on top of that," he said on Fox News.

But regular operations have been disrupted. The Central Command, which oversees operations in the Middle East, said it is "redeploying" troops from Iraq and Syria. "To prevent potential spread of COVID-19, the Iraqi Security Forces have suspended all training. As a result, the Coalition will temporarily return some of its training-focused forces to their own countries in the coming days and weeks," Centcom said in a statement. —AFP

Air quality picking up in quarantined countries

PARIS: Air quality is improving in countries under coronavirus quarantines, experts say, but it is far too early to speak of long-term change. Images by the US space agency NASA are clear, in February the concentration of nitrogen dioxide (NO2) fell dramatically in Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, passing from an indicator that was red/orange to blue. NO2 is mainly produced by vehicles, industrial sites and thermal power stations.

As China moves past the peak of its crisis, however, recent images by the European Space Agency (ESA) show a resurgence in NO2 emissions. A striking reduction has also been observed by the ESA in northern Italy, which has been locked down to fight a spread of the novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19. The European Environment Agency (EEA) reports a similar change in Barcelona and Madrid, where Spanish authorities issued confinement orders in mid March.

Dramatic drop-off

"NO2 is a short-lived pollutant, with a lifetime in the atmosphere of about one day," said Vincent-Henri Peuch, from the EU earth surveillance program Copernicus. "As a result, this pollutant stays near the emissions sources and can be used as a proxy of the intensity of activity in different sectors," he told AFP. Fei Liu, an air quality researcher at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, noted the change in China, saying: "This is the first time I have seen such a dramatic drop-off over such a wide area for a specific event."

Even during the economic crisis more than a decade ago, the decrease in NO2 levels "was more continuous in time," according to EEA air quality specialist Alberto Gonzalez Ortiz. In northern Italy, "average NO2 concentration levels have been almost halved on average," Peuch remarked. The pollutant can provoke serious inflammation of the respiratory system.

Long-term exposure

As for other countries or regions that have told inhabitants to remain confined at home, notably Argentina, Bavaria, Belgium, California, France and Tunisia, specialists are poring over the data to see if the trend is similar.

Meanwhile, less NO2 does not necessarily mean purer air. Beijing experienced episodes of pollution owing to fine particles in February, NASA's Earth Observatory reported. The air in Paris was also rated as moderately polluted Friday owing to the presence of fine particles and NO2 even though the population had already been confined at home for three days. Peuch explained that the concentration of polluting matter can vary with the weather. "Some emissions sources, like energy production and residential use of energy are likely not to be decreasing markedly when more people have to stay at home," he noted. The concentration of so-called PM2.5 and PM10 particles and carbon monoxide (CO) are "also expected to be reducing over time," Peuch said. These are a mixture of minute solid particles and liquid droplets present in the atmosphere with diameters of 2.5 and 10 micrometres (microns). —AFP

International

China scrambling to curb rise in imported coronavirus cases

China reports 46 new virus cases, up from 41 the day before

BEIJING: China yesterday reported 46 new cases of coronavirus, the fourth straight day with an increase, with all but one of those imported from overseas, and further stepped up measures to intercept cases from abroad as the outbreak worsens globally. While China says it has drastically reduced the number of domestically transmitted cases - the one reported yesterday was the first in four days - it is seeing a steady rise in imported cases, mostly from Chinese people returning from overseas.

In a sign of how seriously China is taking the threat of imported cases, all international flights due to arrive in Beijing starting Monday will first land at another airport, where passengers will undergo virus screening, government agencies said yesterday, in an expansion of existing measures. International flights that were scheduled to arrive in the capital will land instead at one of 12 airports. Passengers who clear screening will then be permitted to reboard the plane, which will then fly to Beijing, the regulator said.

Separately, Shanghai and Guangzhou both announced that all arriving international passengers will undergo an RNA test to screen for coronavirus, expanding a program that previously only applied to those coming from heavily-hit countries. Among the new cases from abroad reported yesterday, a record 14 were in the financial hub of Shanghai and 13 were in Beijing, a decline from 21 the previous day.

The new locally transmitted case was in the

southern metropolis of Guangzhou and was also the first known case where the infection of a local person was linked to the arrival of someone from overseas, according to Guangdong province. The latest figures from China's National Health Commission bring total reported coronavirus cases in the country to 81,054, with 3,261 deaths, including six on Saturday. On Saturday, China reported 41 new coronavirus cases for the previous day, all of them imported.

Back to a kind of normal

China is trying to revive an economy that is widely expected to contract deeply in the current quarter, with life slowly returning to normal in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, albeit with everyone wearing masks in public. Still, numerous shops and restaurants remain shut - many have gone out of business - and factories and other workplaces are still not operating at full capacity. Yesterday, a central bank official called for stepped-up global policy coordination to manage the economic impact of the pandemic. He said China's recent policy measures were gaining traction, and it has capacity for further action.

Chen Yulu, a deputy governor at the People's Bank of China (PBOC), also said he expects significant improvement in the Chinese economy in the second quarter. And while the virus will continue putting upward pressure on near-term consumer prices, there is no basis for long-term inflation or deflation, he told a news briefing. Globally, roughly



All but one of new virus cases imported from abroad



SHANGHAI: A woman wearing a facemask amid concerns over the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, arranges the chairs of a restaurant in Shanghai yesterday. —AFP

275,000 people have been infected with the virus, and more than 11,000 have died, according to a Reuters tally, with the number of deaths in Italy recently surpassing those in China.

"Now I think the epidemic has been controlled. But this definitely doesn't mean that it's over," said a 25-year-old woman surnamed He who works in the internet sector and was visiting the vast Summer

Palace complex in Beijing on Saturday. "I'm willing to come out today but of course I am still afraid," she told Reuters. The central province of Hubei, where the outbreak first emerged late last year in its capital Wuhan, reported its fourth straight day of no new cases. China has used draconian measures to contain the spread of the virus, including locking down Hubei province. —Reuters

In Kosovo, coronavirus breeds political maladies

PRISTINA: As Europeans take to their balconies to cheer on health workers every evening, Kosovars have joined the chorus for a different reason: to protest a political debacle threatening to bring down the government in the middle of the coronavirus crisis. Unable to gather en masse on the streets, Pristina residents have been banging pots and pans from their terraces to express anger at politicians accused of exploiting the health emergency for personal gain.

"I could not imagine such misfortune in my worst dreams," 30-year-old economist Azra Marmullaku, who has been joining the nightly noise-making, told AFP by phone. Kosovo has "very modest resources to cope with a pandemic that has brought world powers to their feet," she lamented. "And now, instead of mobilizing all of our potential in the fight for survival, we are wasting our time and energy with a power struggle."

What a shame!

Across the globe, governments have been clicking into crisis-mode to protect citizens from the rapid spread of the virus, which has already claimed more than 11,000 lives. But in Kosovo, a young and unstable European democracy, the new governing coalition is on the cusp of collapse, mired in squabbling, and with the junior partner threatening to leave. While only some 22 cases of the new coronavirus have been detected among the population of 1.8 million, testing has been limited and many fear a major outbreak could easily cripple impoverished Kosovo's already weak healthcare system.

'The Snake'

The government only took office two months ago, marking a historic defeat of former rebel fighters who have dominated Kosovo since it broke away from Serbia 20 years ago. Yet the alliance of the left-wing Vetevendosje party, whose leader Albin Kurti is prime minister, and its centre-right partner, the LDK, has been shaky from the start. Weeks of tension boiled over on Wednesday when Kurti sacked an LDK minister for breaking rank by supporting calls for a state of emergency because of the new coronavirus.

LDK called it the final straw and has submitted a no-confidence motion to parliament. Analysts say the turmoil is playing straight into the hands of President Hashim Thaci, the former guerilla leader whose nom de guerre was "The Snake", who has been at the centre of Kosovo politics for over a decade. Critics accuse him of miring Kosovo in corruption and poverty and the new prime minister has made it clear that he wants Thaci unseated at the next presidential poll in 2021.

But the coronavirus appears to have handed Thaci an opportunity, according to Belul Beqaj, a political science lecturer at Pristina's UBT college. He said that Thaci was now trying to claw back power by dividing the governing coalition and pushing for the state of emergency - a measure that would put him back in charge. He "is trying to exploit the difficult health situation to restore his dominant role in the political scene", Beqaj said. "The initiative to declare a state of emergency is the main evidence for this." —AFP

Crisis-hit Venezuelans turn to homemade remedies to fight virus

GUIRIA: Faced with the coronavirus pandemic on top of an economic crisis that has left shortages of medicines and medical supplies, Venezuelans are turning to homemade remedies to protect themselves. Whether it's hot drinks infused with lemon, salt, garlic or onions, cash-strapped Venezuelans are cooking up concoctions handed down from one generation to another.

No sooner had Venezuela announced its first coronavirus cases than Dilia Zorrilla ran to the shops to buy face masks, anti-bacterial gel, alcohol and chlorine, but also onions for the hostel she runs in Guiria, a remote village in the northwest, 600 kilometers east of the capital Caracas. She asked her employees to place the onions in a glass bowl at the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary, who is particularly venerated on the Caribbean coast. "And that is not too many," she said. Local legend has it that onions can ward off illnesses. When new guests arrive at the hostel, which smells of onions, Zorrilla puts a drop of antiseptic gel in their hands and advises them to go out and buy gloves and face masks. She also serves them a citric herbal tea. "You must drink it," she orders. In this remote area, Zorrilla feels cut off from information. Television and telephone signals are unreliable. "Here, everything we know has come from social media," the 42-year-old told AFP.

North Korea praises Trump but warns on relations

SEOUL: Donald Trump has sent a letter to Kim Jong Un detailing a plan to develop ties, state media reported citing the North Korean leader's powerful sister, but she warned their good personal relationship is not enough, as a hiatus in disarmament talks drags on.

The statement by Kim Yo Jong came a day after the nuclear-armed North fired what appeared to be two short-range ballistic missiles off its east coast on Saturday, the latest such action it has taken this year.

"In the letter, he (Trump)... explained his plan to propel the relations between the two countries of the DPRK and the US and expressed his intent to render cooperation in the anti-epidemic work," an apparent reference to the coronavirus pandemic, Kim Yo Jong said in the statement carried by the North's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on Sunday.

A senior administration official confirmed Trump sent a letter to Kim Jong Un, "consistent with his efforts to engage global leaders during the ongoing pandemic". "The President looks forward to continued communications with Chairman Kim", the official said. While the letter reflects "excellent" ties between the two leaders, Kim Yo Jong warned that broader relations between their two nations are different.

"We try to hope for the day when the relations between the two countries would be as good as the ones between the two top leaders, but it has to be left to time and be watched whether it can actually happen," the sister said. Analysts say the North has been continuing to refine its weapons capabilities more than a year

'Part of the desperation'

In this region infested with drug-traffickers and armed groups, these elixirs form part of the secrets handed down from one generation to the next. For surgeon Jaime Lorenzo from the United Doctors NGO "these measures are part of the desperation" caused by a pandemic that has already killed 13,000 people worldwide, but which has affected just 42 people so far in Venezuela. "As scientists, all remedies need to be based on scientific evidence," Lorenzo told AFP. While these concoctions may have been passed down through generations, none of them has been scientifically tested, Lorenzo said. The best advice, as espoused by President Nicolas Maduro, is to stay at home.

Since the beginning of the week, Venezuela has been under a near-total lockdown. People are only allowed out to buy food or medicines. Schools are closed and most air transport links suspended. Police and soldiers patrol the roads to ensure the decree is respected. But long before COVID-19 arrived in Venezuela, the health system had already collapsed and it was often hard to get hold of medicines, either due to their exorbitant cost or scarcity in pharmacies.

'We're not prepared'

People have turned to homemade remedies even to treat cancer. So "we're just not prepared" to face a pandemic, said 53-year-old trader Alodia Anton, who turned up at the Guiria hospital to have her blood pressure taken. But it wasn't possible "because they don't have a blood pressure meter on the emergency ward."

Her biggest fear is that she or someone close to

after a summit between Kim Jong Un and Trump broke down in Hanoi. The deadlock is over sanctions relief and what North Korea would be willing to give up in return.

Pyongyang - which is under multiple sets of United Nations sanctions over its weapons programs - has repeatedly said amicable ties between the leaders were not enough. Kim Yo Jong praised Trump's efforts to maintain good relations with her brother but added: "Nobody knows how much the personal relations would change and lead the prospective relations between the two countries, and it is not something good to make hasty conclusion or be optimistic about it."

If the US continued to pursue its "unilateral and greedy intention", she said, relations between the two countries would continue to deteriorate. Trump, whose closeness to the North Korean leader and other global strongmen has raised concerns at home, is seeking re-election in November's US election. Pyongyang set Washington a unilateral end-2019 deadline to offer fresh concessions, and in late December Kim declared the North no longer considered itself bound by its moratoriums on nuclear and inter-continental ballistic missile tests.

'Tactical guided weapon'

Rachel Minyoung Lee, senior analyst with specialist site NK News, said the statement from Kim Yo Jong - which followed a new weapons test by Pyongyang - was well-timed to clearly show the North's intentions. "Bottom line: Kim-Trump personal ties are great but are not enough, and we will press ahead with our weapons development agenda," she said.

On Saturday Kim Jong Un observed "the demonstration fire of (a) tactical guided weapon", to showcase the characteristics "and power of a new weapon system to be delivered" to army units, KCNA reported yesterday. In addition, he spoke of "tactical and strategic weapon systems in the development stage", the report said. Late last



GUIRIA: Deteriorated medical equipment is seen at the Guiria hospital, in Guiria, Venezuela. —AFP

her would need emergency medical care: the main hospital in the region is in Cumana, a six-hour drive away on poorly surfaced roads. So Anton makes do with "advice" her sister sends her by WhatsApp from the United States, such as "drink hot tea" with lemon, camomile or "whatever," wash the floor with vinegar and keep onions in her room.

Lorenzo warns against believing "myths" that hot drinks can weaken COVID-19, but that message isn't getting through. "We're drinking boiled water with garlic and lemon," says a tearful Rosa Solangel through a face mask. The 56-year-old cook fears for the health of her three children who have left the country for Brazil, Peru and Colombia - 4.9 million people have fled Venezuela's economic meltdown since the end of 2015 according to UN data. —AFP



PRISTINA: Municipality workers wearing protective face masks deliver free meals for the people in need in Pristina amid the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). —AFP

year, the leader had threatened a demonstration of a "new strategic weapon" soon.

Photos carried by the official Rodong Sinmun newspaper showed Kim, in a black leather trench coat with a broad smile, surrounded by cheering officers in an observation post. None of the officers were wearing face masks, in contrast to recent drills, when all but Kim donned face coverings against the coronavirus outbreak. North Korea insists it has not yet seen a confirmed case on its soil. Shortly before the latest launch, KCNA reported that the rubber-stamp parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly, would convene on April 10.

The event would involve gathering nearly 700 officials in one place, analysts said. Such events have been banned in many parts of the world to curb the spread of new coronavirus. Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, told AFP earlier that Pyongyang is likely struggling with the pandemic, even though the regime has not reported any cases. The UN Security Council has said it would make humanitarian exemptions to sanctions on North Korea to help it fight the coronavirus. —AFP

Business

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KUWAIT: Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi (second right) with the officials of the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority during an emergency meeting.

Zain offers free Internet caps and local calls to customers: Al-Kharafi

Initiative comes with support of Premier, Minister of Defense and CITRA Chairman

KUWAIT: Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi announced that Zain will offer 5 GBs of daily Internet caps and free local voice calls for a period of one month starting from 22 March. The initiative comes as part of the company's commitment towards its customers during these exceptional circumstances to fight the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Al-Kharafi explained that this initiative came as a

response to the emergency meeting that Zain was present at along with the respective entities in the country and the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA). Through this initiative, Zain tries to offer a contribution to support customers during these times that affected all life aspects, both personal and professional.

Al-Kharafi expressed his gratitude and utmost appreciation to Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khalid

Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, and CITRA Chairman and CEO Salem Al-Othaina for offering more frequencies. Al-Kharafi also thanked the Signal Corps for their support in making this initiative a success and swiftly providing the official approvals to offer these free services to customers.

Al-Kharafi added that this initiative reflects Zain's

commitment and its social responsibility, as well as the private sector's role in supporting the state's efforts in handling the current situation. Al-Kharafi hoped Kuwait and its institutions will pass this challenge, and prayed to God to keep Kuwait and its people safe.

Al-Kharafi affirmed that such times would need all the support from the private sector, as such circumstances need everyone's support in order to pass this challenge that affected everyone.

Panic buying, may drive food inflation: FAO

SINGAPORE: Lockdowns and panic food buying due to the coronavirus pandemic could ignite world food inflation even though there are ample supplies of staple grains and oilseeds in key exporting nations, a senior economist at FAO and agricultural analysts said.

The world's richest nations poured unprecedented aid into the global economy as coronavirus cases ballooned across Europe and the United States, with the number of deaths in Italy outstripping those in mainland China, where the virus originated. With over 270,000 infections and more than 11,000 deaths, the epidemic has stunned the world and drawn comparisons with periods such as World War Two and the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic.

"All you need is panic buying from big importers such as millers or governments to create a crisis," said Abdolreza Abbassian, senior economist at the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). "It is not a supply issue, but it is a behavioural change over food security," he told Reuters by phone from Rome, the FAO headquarters. "What if bulk buyers think they can't get wheat or rice shipments in May or June? That is what could lead to a global food supply crisis."

Consumers across the world from Singapore to the United States have queued at super markets in recent weeks to stock up on items ranging from rice and hand sanitizers to toilet paper.

The global benchmark Chicago wheat futures rose more than 6 percent this week, the biggest weekly gain in nine months, while rice prices in Thailand, the world's 2nd largest exporter of the grain, have climbed to the highest since August 2013. France's grain industry is scrambling to find enough trucks and staff to keep factories and ports running as the panic buying of pasta and flour coincides with a surge in wheat exports.

Restrictions imposed by some European Union countries at their borders with other member states in response to the pandemic are also disrupting food supplies, representatives of the industry and farmers said. However, global wheat stocks at the end of the crop marketing year in June are projected to rise to 287.14 million tons, up from 277.57 million tons a year ago, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates. World rice stocks are projected at 182.3 million tonnes as compared with 175.3 million tonnes a year ago.



People, wearing face masks as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, push trolleys loaded with groceries as they leave a supermarket in Hadyai district in Thailand's southern province of Songkla yesterday. — AFP

Logistics are likely to be a major global issue, analysts said. "There is about 140 million tonnes of corn that goes in ethanol in the United States and some of that can be used for food as it won't be needed for fuel, given the drop in oil prices," said Ole Houe, director of advisory services at brokerage IKON Commodities. "The concern is having food at the right time in the right place."

Asian buyers were inactive this week with uncertainty looming in the market. "We are not sure about the demand. What it is going to look like in June or July?" said one Singapore-based purchasing manager at a flour milling company that has operations across Southeast Asia. "Restaurant business is down, and as a result demand is a bit soft right now." Asian wheat importers, including the region's top importer Indonesia, have been taking a bulk of the cargoes from the Black Sea region amid a global oversupply.

Oil exporting nations in the Middle East, which are also net grain importers, are likely to feel more financial pain with crude losing more than 60 percent of its value this year.

"Net oil exporters' capacity to buy grains has dropped given the fall in oil prices and depreciation in currencies," said FAO's Abbassian. "There will be less capacity to take policy actions to boost economies." — Reuters

UAE banks ease pressure on core industries

DUBAI/CAIRO: Banks in the United Arab Emirates announced a raft of measures on Saturday they said would benefit the biggest contributors to the economy as the country announced its first deaths linked to the coronavirus pandemic. Aviation, hospitality, healthcare, retail, event management, consumer goods and education would be prioritized by the banks, which will reschedule or delay loan payments, reduce instalments and cut or reduce fees, state news agency WAM reported.

Dubai's largest bank Emirates NBD, Dubai Islamic, Emirates Islamic and Commercial Bank of Dubai, all state-linked, will introduce the measures from April 1 to June 30, WAM reported.

Mashreq is also taking part and

Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank (ADIB) announced similar measures earlier on Saturday. The UAE also announced it was temporarily closing beaches and parks after they attracted large numbers of people over the weekend, while restaurants and cafes would have to reduce capacity to 20 percent of normal if they wished to stay open.

Schools, cinemas, gyms, nightclubs and some bars have already been shuttered and many concerts and sporting events have been cancelled. The Gulf Arab state over the weekend reported two deaths linked to the coronavirus, its first fatalities. There have been 153 infections. Dubai government's media office tweeted that people should stay home. — Reuters



DUBAI: Banks in the United Arab Emirates announced a raft of measures on Saturday they said would benefit the biggest contributors to the economy as the country announced its first deaths linked to the coronavirus pandemic. — Reuters

Business

Crude reality: Price crash means oil firms must slash spending

Investment in oil exploration and production falls sharply

PARIS: Confronted with a dizzying drop in prices, oil firms face a real challenge as they try to cut investment spending in order to survive a coronavirus-induced collapse in demand coupled with a Russia-Saudi Arabia price war. Investment in oil exploration and production was set to hit just over half a trillion dollars this year according to the French research body IFPEN, as firms sought to maintain and expand output.

But the emergence of the coronavirus, which has seen nations across the world confine citizens at home and shutter businesses to slow its spread, has upended all forecasts. The International Energy Agency, which advises oil-importing nations on energy policy, now expects the first annual drop in oil demand since 2009 during the global financial crisis, as the global economy tips into recession.

The main international benchmark, Brent crude, has fallen from just shy of \$60 per barrel to under \$25 this week, before regaining some lost ground.

The main US benchmark, WTI, tumbled from nearly \$54 to just over \$20. Not all of the drop is due to the coronavirus. The price of oil had been supported for the past couple of years by production limits agreed by the OPEC oil cartel led by Saudi Arabia and a number of other producers including Russia.

However Russia and Saudi Arabia failed to agree earlier this month on deeper cuts to take account of falling demand due to the coronavirus pandemic. Saudi Arabia subsequently slashed prices and announced it would boost output and Russia followed suit, leading to the vertiginous drop in prices.

Cut and shift

"All companies in the sector will be seeing what more they can do to cut costs, shift their activities to the lowest cost fields they can, trim investment and think hard about what dividend they can pay," said Professor David Elmes at Warwick Business School. While reducing investment is relatively easy in the near term, the longer prices remain low the more

firms will need to look at shutting down production that is more expensive, such as offshore. "For the majors, the prospect of \$30 per barrel of oil or below for a period of time is an extreme challenge," said Biraj Borkhataria, an analyst at RBC Capital Markets.

He said that if these prices persist more than six months, then oil majors would need to cut into the generous dividends they pay-which is why they are prized by many investors-and that prospect has already been partly incorporated into their share prices.

'Unprecedented'

Saudi Aramco says it will cut investment to \$25-\$30 billion this year, a modest drop on the \$32.8 billion it spent last year. "Based on this unprecedented environment, we are evaluating all appropriate steps to significantly reduce capital and operating expenses in the near term," said Exxon Mobil Corporation's chief executive Darren Woods.

British oil major BP is targeting a 20 percent drop in spending this year, its chief financial officer Brian Gilvary said in an interview on Bloomberg television.

There are also many smaller oil companies who may struggle. "The medium-sized independent companies will be hit hard," said Moez Ajmi at auditing firm EY in France. "Decisions will be taken to delay projects and we'll see restructurings of debt." The boom in shale oil production made the United States the world's top producer and even a net exporter, but the industry is fragile. Many of the independent shale firms have been built on debt and even before the drop in prices had trouble turning a profit, according to analysts.

Poor returns

Environmental activists can barely hide their joy at the difficulties the oil industry faces. "We consider it is pretty much good news considering that these (exploration and development) projects shouldn't see the light of day given the urgency of climate



This photo taken on March 20, 2020 shows a police officer wearing a mask amid concerns over the COVID-19 coronavirus while keeping watch as a Kuwaiti oil tanker unloads crude oil at the port in Qingdao, in China's eastern Shandong province. —AFP

change," said Cecile Marchand of the French chapter of Friends of the Earth.

She acknowledged abandoning these projects may not be permanent unless major political and economic policy changes are made. Marchand also warned of the risk of "a concentration of the market in the hands of the majors who are more resilient than the small firms."

Elmes at Warwick Business School said some positive outcomes were also possible. The European oil and gas majors have already indicated they intend to reduce their reliance on these fuels and

become more active in renewables such as wind and solar. "There will be intense discussions on what they can do to move faster," he said. The industry as a whole may also find it is no longer the darling of investors. "Bankers will throw up their hands and bend to the pressure from institutional investors now demanding transparency for the emissions associated with their investments," said Elmes.

"The profitability of the oil and gas sector used to be attractively high but now it has the worst return over the last five years across 33 different industries," he noted. —AFP

US airlines warn of harsh steps if Congress fails to help

WASHINGTON: The chief executives of the largest US airline companies asked Congress Saturday for urgent help avoiding widespread layoffs among the industry's 750,000 employees.

"Unless worker payroll protection grants are passed immediately, many of us will be forced to take draconian measures such as furloughs," the CEOs said in a letter to leaders of both houses of Congress distributed by the Airlines for America trade group.

"The breadth and immediacy of the need to act cannot be overstated," it said. "It is urgent and unprecedented." Airlines for America represents American Airlines, United Airlines, Delta Air Lines and Southwest Airlines as well as shippers FedEx and UPS.

"On behalf of 750,000 airline professionals and our nation's airlines, we respectfully request Congress to continue to move expeditiously to pass a bipartisan proposal that includes a combination of worker payroll protection grants, loans and loan guarantees and tax measures. Time is running out."

The signatories appeared to be trying, in part, to counter recent negative publicity over reports that in recent years the airlines, while taking in billions in profits, used stock buybacks and other measures to reward shareholders rather than putting money into workers' salaries or a rainy-day fund.

President Donald Trump seemed to allude to those reports during Saturday's White House briefing on the coronavirus, saying of plans to help US companies, "I want money to be used for workers and keeping businesses open, not buybacks. I am strongly recommending a buyback exclusion. You cannot buy back your stock. You can't take a billion dollars of the money and buy back your stock."

The letter said the sector had already taken steps to protect itself from the catastrophic effects of the coronavirus-which the International Air Transport Association estimates could wipe \$30 billion in revenues from the books of global airlines.

Over the past decade, the letter said, the industry had reinvested 73 percent of its operational earnings "in our personnel and our products." But the letter added that the ability to renegotiate credits was waning amid the panic seizing the debt market, given the amplitude of the virus crisis.

The pandemic has had a devastating effect on air transport in the United States and elsewhere, as several countries have imposed far-reaching travel bans. The US Congress has already passed two emergency rescue plans. This weekend, it is working on another aid package with a price tag of over \$1 trillion, which could be voted on in the Senate as early as Monday if Democrats and Republicans reach agreement. —AFP

Australia adds \$38 billion in stimulus

MELBOURNE/SYDNEY: Australia's government will spend additional A\$66.4 billion (\$38.50 billion) as part of a second stimulus package to shelter the economy from the financial impact of the coronavirus, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said yesterday, as states moved to impose major lockdowns.

The new stimulus will go to individuals in need and small and medium-sized businesses. Those businesses produce about a third of the country's annual economic output and employ more than 40% of the workforce, according to government statistics. "We will be focusing on those in the front line, those who will be feeling the first blows of the economic impact of the coronavirus," Morrison said in Canberra yesterday. "There will be more packages and more support."

Downgrade doom looms for virus-hit firms and markets

LONDON/NEW YORK: A wave of credit rating downgrades in the corporate sector risks deepening a funding crisis for company bosses and spreading it to other markets.

The coronavirus' suckerpunch to the global economy has prompted Moody's rating agency to review its corporate ratings, the agency told Reuters this week, with a slew of downgrades or downgrade warnings on the cards. A credit rating cut is a blow for a company in any circumstance, making it more expensive to raise fresh debt or refinance existing bonds. But it is potentially devastating when markets are in a panic and company cashflows are shrinking.

A downgrade to 'junk' status, the lowest credit rating indicating a higher risk of default, forces investors to scatter

EU eyes use of bailout fund to unlock ECB plan

BRUSSELS: The European Commission next week is likely to present a tool for the euro zone's ESM bailout fund to fight the effects of the coronavirus epidemic that could unlock unlimited ECB sovereign bond purchases, Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis said.

The EU executive arm has been

The package, which dwarfs the A\$17.6 billion (\$10.20 billion) in initial measures announced last week, came with a pledge by the government to enforce social distancing rules after many Australians appeared to disregard health warnings and flocked to pubs and beaches amid a warm autumn spell. After an initial relatively slow spread, the number of coronavirus infections in Australia has been rising quickly in recent days, climbing to 1,098 confirmed cases as of yesterday morning with seven recorded deaths linked to COVID-19. Morrison said that the government would help underwrite loans to small and medium-sized businesses and boost unemployment benefits as companies are forced to lay off staff.

Jobseekers will get extra money and people in financial stress will also be able access up to A\$10,000 tax-free of their pension funds for this and next year, while some not-for-profits and small businesses will have access to cash grants to keep staff employed. Together with more than A\$100 billion announced earlier in emergency banking measures to prevent a credit freeze and the initial stimulus package, Australia has now

because many asset managers cannot hold junk-rated debt. Without any willing buyers, the risk is a panicked sell-off which could also spread to other markets.

Moritz Kraemer, a former top sovereign analyst at S&P, likened the risk to when Greece lost its investment grade as the eurozone debt storm was whipping up. "There was no one to catch the knife when it fell," he said. "As the ratings get pushed down there are not enough junk grade investors to absorb it all." S&P upped the ante on Friday cutting two of Europe's biggest flag carriers British Airways' owner IAG and Germany's Lufthansa to the last notch of investment grade and warning they could be downgraded again. With certain sectors such as airlines, travel and energy badly hit, S&P has said it now sees default rates in the United States surging past 10 percent having only last month expected 3.5 percent, and Fitch is firing warnings too.

Adding to the sector's vulnerabilities, the squeeze on ratings comes when the corporate sector is more vulnerable than it was 10 years ago. Low interest rates

asked by euro zone finance ministers, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and the European Central Bank to come up with an instrument to involve the fund in supporting economies hit by the coronavirus, he said. The ESM has 410 billion euros (\$438 billion) of unused lending power. "This work is ongoing," Dombrovskis said. "One of the issues is the size of ESM programs, which may be limited given it was primarily created to respond to asymmetric economic shocks and here we have a symmetric shock which affects all member states." "From that point of it is important to have a dedicated ESM tool which would help in



SYDNEY: A man walks past the Reserve Bank of Australia in the central Business District of Sydney. Australia's central bank cut interest rates to record lows and moved to pump billions into the financial system in an emergency bid to pull the economy out of a pandemic-induced free-fall. —AFP

announced financial measures equalling about 10 percent of the country's annual gross domestic product, the government said. "The degree of stimulus released in such a short period of time highlights the

scale of the looming demand shock (due to both containment measures, as well as business and consumer confidence)," economists at the National Australia Bank said in a note. —Reuters



NEW YORK: A man makes a delivery near the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in New York City. Trading on the floor will temporarily become fully electronic starting today to protect employees from spreading the coronavirus. —AFP

have encouraged companies to gorge on record amounts of cheap debt-globally corporate debt has risen more than 50

percent since 2008 to over \$72 trillion, Bank for International Settlements (BIS) data shows. —Reuters

case of necessity to unblock Outright Monetary Transactions of the ECB, which can buy bonds in unlimited quantities if necessary," Dombrovskis said.

The Commission expects the pandemic, which has triggered lockdowns in most EU countries and put whole sectors of the economy out of action, to mean a 1 percent-2.5 percent EU recession or worse versus the previously expected 1.4 percent economic growth this year. The ESM now has the Enhanced Conditions Credit Line (ECCCL) which it can extend to a government in need under certain conditions, but some officials worry the offer

could carry a stigma of financial trouble in the eyes of the market.

Yet securing the ECCCL, together with the possibility of the ESM buying a government's bonds at primary auctions, would make the government eligible for the ECB's OMT program. This is key because given the scale of support needed in case the whole euro zone needs help, the ESM's resources would not be enough, top eurozone officials said. But the size of an ESM credit line would be irrelevant if it paved the way for ECB action - enough to calm down markets. —Reuters

Business

Talabat rolls out contactless, cashless delivery for customer and rider safety

Customer will need to choose an online payment option

KUWAIT: Talabat, the region's leading food delivery platform, is today rolling out contactless delivery for anyone placing and paying for orders online. This initiative has been developed for rider and customer safety, and to enable this automatically, the customer will need to choose an online payment option.

How does contactless delivery work?

When the rider arrives, ring the doorbell, and place by your door for your convenience. Our rider will then practice social distancing, while making sure you get your order, before departing on their next delivery. Tomaso Rodriguez, Talabat CEO, believes that these measures continue to show Talabat's emphasis on safety in the current COVID19 outbreak, however cus-

tomers need to pay by online payment for this to work.

'At Talabat, safety is our top priority at all times, especially in this current COVID19 outbreak. We implore you, as a customer to pay by online payment (debit, credit or Talabat credit), which means no physical cash needs to exchange hands, therefore making contactless delivery possible.

By making delivery contactless for our customers and our riders, we are putting health first,' Rodriguez said. In addition, for this initiative, Talabat will also be distributing door hangers which customers can leave to indicate that a contactless drop off is required.

Consumers can download the Talabat app for Android from Google Play or iOS on the Apple App Store.



Easa Husain Al-Yousifi & Sons launches Panasonic Extreme vacuum cleaner

KUWAIT: Easa Husain Al-Yousifi & Sons Company has announced the launch of a new Panasonic range of vacuum cleaners to provide the ideal cleaning solution for larger homes and similar spaces in Kuwait. The Panasonic Extreme Series Vacuum Cleaners is the first ever in the market to offer a detachable drum feature, taking fast, thorough and convenient cleaning to a whole new level.

With the Extreme Series' ingenious design, Panasonic effectively eliminates extra physical effort from the user when cleaning spaces using a drum vacuum cleaner. Thanks to its revolutionary drum that can be operated with a foot pedal control, dust disposal has never been easier. Its big dust capacity further elevates the no-sweat cleaning experience as it allows users to get rid of every dust and dirt particles in every spot of the house without the need to frequently empty the drum.

The Extreme range, available in five models, boasts unmatched performance with its extremely powerful suction capability. Heading the series are two made-in-Japan models - MC-YL999,

with 2400W input power and 21L capacity, and MC-YL989, with 2300W input power and 21L capacity. The top-of-the-line MC-YL999 is built with a Full Capture Nozzle, which enables thorough cleaning right up to edges and in corners. Completing the range are three Extreme Vacuum models manufactured in Malaysia - MC-YL798, with 2300W input power, 21L capacity and equipped with a Full Capture Nozzle; MC-YL788, with 2200W input power and 21L capacity; and, MC-YL778, with 2100W input power and 18L capacity. The premium Japan models MC-YL999 and MC-YL989 will debut in Kuwait in March 2020. Meanwhile, Extreme Vacuum models MC-YL798, MC-YL788 and MC-YL778 will be available at all Best Electronics Showrooms in Kuwait in February 2020.

Wael Deeb - Electronics dept General Manager at Al-Yousifi company, said, it's imperative that Panasonic continuously seek ways to offer new experience to everyone and create products and solutions that make everyday life better. The Extreme Vacuum Cleaner series does that. These new vacuum cleaners were designed



by Panasonic with optimal efficiency and unmatched convenience in mind. Panasonic kept in mind the specific needs of local customers - noting the constant accumulation of endless amounts of dust and sand particles in homes and other large spaces like villas, mosques and schools. Using their core technologies, boosted by continuous researches and development efforts, Panasonic combined the perfect blend of craftsmanship, design and intelligent features in order to provide the most value to customers and bring them 'a better life, a better world.'

Along with the powerful motor and large capacity dust drum, the Extreme Vacuum Cleaners are also built with big rollers for effortless movement over small obstacles such as thick carpets. A cord rewind function elimi-

nates messy, tangled cords, at the same time allows for trouble-free storage. The low position of the hose also ensures improved maneuverability and stable movement.

Enhancing the appliance's durability is the rubber shield on the motor, which keeps sand and dust out. For extra safety, a ground chain is attached to the drum as a countermeasure for static electricity. Finally, the Extreme Vacuum Cleaners' Anti-Bacterial filter includes copper in the fabric. This copper eliminates odor particles through chemical bonding to keep the filter clean while improving room air quality and free of pollutants.

These models of Panasonic vacuum cleaners are available at all Best Al-Yousifi Electronics showrooms & authorized distributors in Kuwait.

From 'Sam-suck' to Apple rival: Samsung growth

SEOUL: Military-style management and an unquestioning reverence for the founding Lee family have fuelled Samsung's transition from the world's most ridiculed phonemaker to its biggest, says the author of a new book. Today Samsung-by far South Korea's most powerful conglomerate with more than 50 affiliates from electronics and insurance to hotels and apartments-is a larger smartphone manufacturer than Apple, and at the same time a key supplier to its great rival. The group's overall turnover is equivalent to a fifth of the GDP of the world's 12th-largest economy, where citizens sometimes refer to their country as the "Republic of Samsung".

It is a remarkable transformation from only a few years ago when Western consumers mocked it as "Sam-suck" for its unreliable products.

At first fascinated by the firm, author Geoffrey Cain said: "As I got deeper, I felt like I was going down the rabbit hole." Its rise was tainted with corruption, he writes in "Samsung Rising", a rare English-language detailing of the highly secretive and opaque empire, published last week in the US.

Cain interviewed around 400 people, including current and former Samsung employees, executives and politicians, he said, but many refused to be named or go on the record.

'Heaven and earth'

Founder Lee Byung-chul started Samsung-the name means "Three Stars"-as a vegetable and dried fish shop in 1938 and after the Korean War expanded into sugar, finance, chemicals, electronics and more. Lee saw Samsung as more than a business, identified with the war-ravaged nation itself, and it played a key part in South Korea's rise to become Asia's fourth-biggest economy.

He forged close relations with military dictator Park Chung-hee, and married off his sons to daughters of governors and ministers, sealing enduring connections with political power. Cain zeroes in on the firm's long-running relationship with Apple, which began when a youthful Steve Jobs met Lee Byung-chul in 1983 as he sought parts to build a tablet computer - 27 years before releasing the iPad.

A short-lived alliance was revived in 2005, when Samsung Electronics went to Jobs with its new NAND flash memory chips and became sole memory



SUWON: Staff wearing face masks guide shareholders to a meeting room before a general meeting of stockholders of Samsung Electronics in Suwon.—AFP

provider for the iPod. The South Korean firm has since become a competitor to Apple as well as a supplier, even though its own executives once dismissed their own products, saying the iPhone and Galaxy S were as different as "heaven and earth".

The change was effected through military-style discipline and long, intense hours, Cain says.

"Untouchable 'generals' charged into each new project, and even when things looked iffy, the field troops were expected to praise them to the skies, convincing themselves of their company's and leaders' greatness," he writes. Despite sometimes "bizarro" working practices-lorryloads of fruit were delivered to a US office to remind staff of their mission "to take a bite out of Apple"-most Samsung employees displayed unquestioning reverence for the founding family, Cain writes.

'United States of Apple'

Samsung is by far the biggest of the family-controlled conglomerates known as chaebol that dominate business in the South, and has come to epitomize their power, influence, and murky political connections. With senior executives Lee Kun-hee, the founder's son and successor, planned a smooth hereditary transfer to his own son Lee Jae-yong, using financial tools like convertible bonds, exploiting legal loopholes, and even cash gifts, with Cain saying: "People were lining up to go to jail for the chairman."

In the event it was Lee Jae-yong himself who ended up behind bars, found guilty of bribing former president Park Geun-hye as part of the sprawling corruption scandal that brought her down.

The vice-chairman of Samsung Electronics and the group's de facto leader since a 2014 heart attack left his father bedridden, he served a year in jail before most of his convictions were dismissed on appeal, but is now being re-tried. Samsung Electronics declined to comment about the book to AFP, but its Korean publisher said the company had not sought to impede publication.

South Korea's chaebols have little in common with the more entrepreneurial and shareholder-driven firms in the US, writes Cain. In the past, several conglomerate leaders have been criminally convicted but have all ultimately received presidential pardons-including Lee Kun-hee, found guilty of bribing politicians and, separately, embezzlement and tax evasion.

"Could you imagine Steve Jobs getting pardoned by two different US presidents, and Americans calling their country the 'United States of Apple'?" Cain told AFP. But Lee Jae-yong's prison absence did Samsung Electronics no financial damage-it made record profits during the period, and its shareholders have no doubts. At its annual meeting last week Kim Sang-woon, 68, told AFP that he was "honored" to own a small piece of the empire, adding: "I'm very satisfied and proud of everything." —AFP

Private, online and hi-tech: Virus economy

HONG KONG: The coronavirus pandemic has sent stock markets into freefall and industries to the wall, however many firms enabling more private, online and tech-based living are emerging as potential winners. As hundreds of millions of people worldwide are forced to stay in their homes and not travel abroad, the businesses that are helping them to adapt could lead to long-term changes in the economy.

"I think certain aspects of work and organizing will change for good through the current situation," said Sally Maitlis, a professor of organisational behavior at Oxford University's Saïd Business School. "People will discover that they can work and communicate in ways they previously didn't think possible, and will be forced to become more nimble with tech through having no choice to do otherwise." Here are comparisons of several sectors that are thriving and failing in the pandemic:

E-commerce giants vs independent stores

Large online retailers have seen a surge in orders as self-isolating or home-working consumers turn to their massive distribution and delivery networks to provide daily essentials.

Shares in US retail giants Walmart and Amazon both tumbled as markets crashed around the world on March 16. During the week Walmart rose as much as 25 percent from its nine-month low on Monday. Amazon also recovered.

"We are seeing increased online shopping and as a result some products such as household staples and medical supplies are out of stock," Amazon said. Yet small, independent stores are suffering, said UK Federation of Small Businesses chair Mike Cherry. "These are already very difficult times for all small businesses right across the country. There are huge concerns over supply chains while on top of this footfall continues to drop. The prospect for these businesses over the coming weeks is increasingly bleak."

Streaming vs cinemas

Demand for movies to watch at home has soared so much that Netflix and YouTube are reducing the quality of their streaming in Europe-which has become the epicentre of the virus-to ease pressure on the internet. Worldwide streaming activity jumped by 20 percent last weekend, according to Bloomberg News. Traditional cinema chains, however, are facing an unprecedented drop in demand.

Some have temporarily closed their doors to help contain the virus's spread. US-listed shares in Cinemark and AMC Entertainment were both down around 60 percent on Friday from their respective highs in January and February.

Private jets vs commercial planes

The airline sector has been hit hard by quarantine rules and border closures, with UK airline Flybe crashing into bankruptcy and experts predicting others will follow. The International Air Transport Association said Thursday that up to \$200 billion is needed to rescue the global industry. US airlines have sought more than \$50 billion in government assistance in recent days, with one top US official saying the outbreak poses a bigger threat to the commercial industry than the September 11 attacks. In contrast, private jet charter companies are seeing demand soar.

Wealthy customers are seeking to distance themselves from the "unknown" travel histories of fellow passengers, said Daniel Tang, from Hong Kong-based charter company MayJets.

US-based Paramount Business Jets has seen inquiries go "through the roof", its chief executive Richard Zaher said. Queries have risen 400 percent and bookings are up 20-25 percent.

Home workouts vs gyms

As many gyms close their doors, fitness-lovers are turning to online classes and home workouts. Shares in US home gym equipment company Peloton surged as investors bet on increasing demand for its stationary exercise bikes and memberships to streaming online workout sessions. At one stage Peloton's share price was up more than 50 percent from Monday's intra-day low.

Teleconferences vs real world meetings

With more and more people working from home to limit the virus's spread, demand for technology that enables online group meetings, chats and collaborations has spiked. "There is such excitement around remote work that brands like Zoom have seen their stock value climb up," Creative Strategies analyst Carolina Milanesi said, referring to the teleconferencing app. At the same time, real world gatherings from sporting events to business conferences, have been postponed or cancelled, with a large question mark still lingering over the fate of this summer's Olympic Games in Japan. —AFP

Sewing face masks goes viral in Europe

PISEK: What do prisoners, a former first lady and textile makers have in common? All have threaded their needles to combat a dire global shortage of face masks that risks the health of millions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Just a week ago, the small Czech company Nanospace was producing bed linen using nanomembrane—a textile with a very fine web of nanofibres—to protect allergic sleepers from mites.

But as the deadly novel coronavirus started reaping its grim toll in Europe, Nanospace workshops began churning out 10,000 nanomembrane face masks per day for two hospitals in the southern Czech Republic. The company produced the first masks within two days of a desperate call from the local city hall on March 14.

"We charge them (the hospitals) at cost price. If the hospitals collapse due to a shortage of masks, our region will be in big trouble," Nanospace sales director Jiri Kus told AFP. The World Health Organization recommends wearing protective masks in public, despite some experts saying masks and gloves are ineffective in preventing coronavirus infections. Tens of thousands of Europeans are joining forces via social media to sew masks as millions are confined to their homes under lockdown measures imposed to prevent COVID-19 infections.

A Czech Facebook group called "Czechia sews face masks" went viral, drawing over 33,000 members over the last week as Prague ordered citizens to wear masks outdoors and closed borders to stem the spread of the virus. Artists and celebrities including actress Dagmar Havlova, the wife of late Czech president Vaclav Havel, have also pitched-in to make masks. In neighboring Poland, Chechen women who arrived as refugees have teamed up with women's groups to sew masks for hospitals.

Mask-making has also taken off in Italy, the worst-hit country in the world. Deaths surged past 4,800 as of Saturday, with more than 53,000 confirmed infections. Italian clothes and textiles-maker

Miroglio has swapped sewing women's fashion for cotton face masks, rapidly ramping up production to 75,000 units per day with a view to hitting 100,000 soon, the La Stampa daily reported.

Businesses in hard-hit Spain are also making the switch. Bag maker Disenos NT told AFP it was producing 70-80,000 face masks per day in its Andalusian factory, working "at 100 percent capacity, 24 hours, seven days a week." The Galicia-based Inditex, the world's largest fashion group that owns Zara among other popular brands, is also looking to begin making face masks at some plants, joining smaller Spanish textile companies already at work. Spain has recorded Europe's second-highest COVID-19 death toll, hitting 1,326 as of Saturday, with almost 25,000 confirmed cases.

Prisoners are also pitching in. Female inmates in the small EU Baltic state of Lithuania aim to turn out 10,000 face masks per week for use in prisons to safeguard officers, convicts and their lawyers. Lithuanian Justice Minister Elvinas Jankevicius told AFP. Hungarian prisoners have made some 300,000 face masks for the country's health sector since February.

Dubbed "Europe's sweatshop" because of its many low-cost fast-fashion factories, Bulgaria has seen dozens of them switch to making masks as orders for clothes dry up amid the Europe-wide closure of non-essential shops, including clothing stores. Costume-makers from the shuttered opera in the eastern Bulgarian city of Burgas have also volunteered to make masks, while Angel Baby, a firm producing sleeping bags for kids in the capital Sofia, is handing out masks decorated with owl, dinosaur, llama and monkey prints to doctors and the police.

Stitching solidarity
A hospital in the western German city of Essen has taken mask-making into its own hands, with non-medical staff ranging from clerks to gardeners working from home to sew masks for patients.



JAKARTA: A woman wearing a face mask, amid concerns of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak, speaks on her phone in Jakarta yesterday. — AFP

German sports clothes maker Trigema and mattress-maker Breckle are among several companies also starting to make them.

Back in the Czech Republic, Nanospace sales director Jiri Kus is smiling as he scrambles for supplies and financing to expand mask production to the clack and rumble of the seven sewing machines

in one of his workshops. "I'm happy we've made it. At first I thought it was impossible, but when I saw the first hundred face masks on Monday, it just felt great." "Now we have volunteers offering help—they are sewing masks at home and although we can't use them, the solidarity and the enthusiasm are simply amazing." — AFP

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Lifestyle | Gossip



Cardi B to donate proceeds from coronavirus remix to victims

Cardi B will donate the proceeds from her coronavirus rant remix to victims of the illness. The 'Bodak Yellow' hitmaker has found herself unintentionally creeping up through the charts this week after DJ iMarkkeyz turned her expletive-filled tirade, in which she fumed about the seriousness of the virus on her Instagram account, into a rap song. And the 27-year-old rapper is planning to put the success of the new song to good use by donating the "coin" she receives to people in financial hardship as a result of the virus that has swept around the globe, infecting over 200,000 people and killing over 3000. Taking to her Instagram account, Cardi uploaded a screenshot of the song in 96th place on the hip-hop/rap charts and wrote: "The fact this damn corona virus song is charting on iTunes ...Hold on .let me hit the DJ up and Atlantic so I can't get my damn coins (sic)" One

fan asked on Twitter: Yo if y'all are getting royalties off of this @iamcardib @iMarkkeyz maybe u could consider donating a part of it to food banks or shelters that are probably flooded with new people needing help?" To which iMarkkeyz wrote back: "That was my goal." And Cardi added: "Yes! That's what we going to do! Keep in mind you don't get your money right away ...but even months from now there would be families with financial issues for getting laid off due to the virus. We will donate! (sic)" Just days before her rant went into the charts, Cardi said she was having to push back the release date of her new single because of the coronavirus. Responding to a fan's request for an update on her new single, Cardi - who is one of the world's best-selling artists - wrote on Twitter: "It's delay due to the virus (sic)"

Country music legend Kenny Rogers dies at 81



Country music legend Kenny Rogers, whose career spanned six decades, has died at the age of 81, his family said late Friday. "Rogers passed away peacefully at home from natural causes under the care of hospice and surrounded by his family," they said in a statement. The family said they were planning a small private service "out of concern for the national COVID-19 emergency." Kenny Rogers left an indelible mark on the history of American music. "His songs have endeared music lovers and touched the lives of millions around the world," said the statement posted by his representative Keith Hagan. A three-time Grammy winner who sold tens of millions of records, Rogers was known for a string of hits including "The Gambler," "Lucille" and "Islands in the Stream." Released in 1978, "The Gambler" album was a huge international hit, going multi-platinum, and the title track became his signature song. Rogers also starred the film "The Gambler," which was based on the song, but he liked to joke that he wasn't much of a gambler himself. "I learned a long time ago, I can't win enough money to excite me, but I can lose enough to depress me," he told NPR in 2015. "So I don't gamble." He played his final concert at Nashville in October 2017, where he was joined by his long-time friend and collaborator Dolly Parton for a last performance of "Islands in the Stream." In April 2018 Rogers scrapped the final dates of his farewell tour due to health concerns. "I didn't want to take forever to retire," the singer said. "I've thoroughly enjoyed this opportunity to say farewell to fans over the course of the past two years," he said, adding that he could "never properly thank them for the encouragement and support they've given me throughout my career." Born in Houston, Texas, Rogers started his career in the late 1950s and quickly became active in rockabilly, jazz and other genres that he brought into his country style. He went on to have 24 number one hits, was a six-time Country Music Association Awards winner and was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. His easygoing ballads and constant touring won him mainstream pop appeal, as have his popular takes on Christmas standards. Rogers also came to prominence through his collaboration with Parton and appearances on films and television programs including "The Muppet Show." Married five times, he is survived by his wife Wanda and five children, including twin boys.



Lady Gaga is 'getting serious' with her new boyfriend

Lady Gaga is "getting serious" with her new boyfriend. The 33-year-old singer has only been dating Michael Polansky a matter of months but it seems their relationship is going from strength-to-strength as she's already started telling her friends that she's "completely in love" with the investor - even though she's only just split from sound engineer Dan Horton. A source told 'Entertainment Tonight': "Gaga is really getting serious with her boyfriend and the chemistry is undeniable." At first she wanted to keep it low key and quiet because she had just gotten out of a relationship and thought taking it slow would be good, but they had an immediate connection, so it was tough to keep under wraps. They were spending so much time together, she finally decided to post on Instagram to make it official. "She wasn't expecting to get so involved so quickly after her last relationship, but she started telling her friends she was completely in love with him." Anyone that has spent any time with them can see the connection. They are completely smitten.

Her friends haven't seen her this happy in years. It didn't take long for her friends to adore him too. "The couple are determined to make their relationship work even though their busy careers often pull them in different directions for an extended period at a time. The insider explained: "Gaga's life is so busy, she is nonstop work most of the time and Michael is supportive of her schedule." He can often work remotely so even travels with her." Earlier this week, Gaga admitted she hated being single after a series of failed relationships - which included former fiancés Christian Carino and Taylor Kinney - and was "having a lot of trouble with" her new solo status. She said: "It was a really hard process for me because I was going through a time in my life ... I was actually having a lot of trouble with it, I did not like being single." I felt like my career had kind of taken over everything and that my personal life was something that I didn't get to have as much time to pursue and have control over and I got very sad."

'Friends' reunion special put on hold due to coronavirus

The 'Friends' reunion special has been delayed due to coronavirus. Filming on the HBO Max show, which is to see the sitcom's stars Courteney Cox, David Schwimmer, Jennifer Aniston, Lisa Kudrow, Matthew Perry, and Matt LeBlanc reunite on the programme's soundstage for an unscripted reunion, was due to start filming next month. Sources confirmed to Variety that the special has been delayed, and shooting has been pushed back to May at the earliest. It comes as filming on countless TV shows and movies has been suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has resulted in nearly 9,000 deaths worldwide. Courteney, David, Jennifer, Lisa, and Matthew all took to social media last month to confirm the sitcom is getting a long-awaited reunion, 16 years after the

final episode aired in 2004. Each actor also posted the same caption, which simply stated "it's happening" and tagged their co-stars, and HBO Max. The original series ran for a decade from 1994 to 2004, and aired over 200 episodes. The 'Friends' cast have been asked about the possibility of a reunion for several years, and some have even dismissed the idea completely in that time. David - who plays Ross Geller - recently said he didn't think a revival of the show would be "possible". He said: "I just don't think it's possible, given everyone's different career trajectories. I think everyone feels the same. Why mess with what felt like the right way to end the series?" "I don't want to do anything for the money. It would have to make sense creatively and nothing I've heard so far presented to us makes sense.



"Maybe there should be an all-black 'Friends' or an all-Asian 'Friends'." HBO Max bosses insisted there was "interest all round" for a reunion. Chief content officer Kevin Reilly said: "There's interest all the way around, and yet we can't seem to quite get that interest all aligned to push the button on it, so today unfortu-

nately it's still a maybe." 'Friends' centred around the lives of six pals living in New York City, comprised of siblings Ross and Monica Geller (Courteney), Chandler Bing (Matthew), Joey Tribbiani (Matt), Rachel Green (Jennifer), and Phoebe Buffay (Lisa).

Bynes' parents to get custody of her baby

Amanda Bynes' parents may get custody of her unborn child. The 'She's the Man' hitmaker is believed to be "about six weeks pregnant" with her first child but her mother Lynn - who is her conservator after a judge ruled in 2013 that she doesn't have the mental capacity to make decisions for herself - is reportedly planning to file in a dependency court in Los Angeles, California, so that her condition can be reviewed and it can be

ruled where the baby will live after it's born. However, according to The Blast, Amanda's boyfriend Paul Michael - who she met at an AA meeting - will also have the right to fight for custody of the unborn tot. But the publication reports that the likely outcome will be that the 33-year-old former actress will be forced to live with her parents and will have visitation of her own baby. A source claimed that friends and family of Amanda - who is currently receiving treatment in a psychiatric facility - believe she may have been trying to get pregnant. However, Amanda's lawyer David Esquias told TMZ: "I'm not confirming that Amanda is expecting and because of that it's premature for anyone to speculate about who would have custody of Amanda's unborn child." The former child star announced that she was pregnant on Instagram on Tuesday when she shared an ultrasound photo bearing her name and the date. She captioned the shot: "Baby on board." Her on/off

boyfriend, Paul, 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 'What A Girl Wants' 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 their wedding may not happen as Amanda's mother 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 the 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.



Naomi Campbell bathes in salt and vinegar every day

The 49-year-old model takes her health and well-being very seriously so makes sure she jumps in the tub for 30 minutes at a time because it calms her down. The brunette beauty is quoted by The Sun newspaper as saying: "I do a bath with Epsom salts and Kosher salts and vinegar. It's very calming for the nervous system. I sit in there for 30 minutes, then I do a facial." And Naomi has more time for her bizarre baths now that she's self-isolating at home amid the coronavirus crisis, which has infected over 200,000 worldwide. The catwalk icon - who is normally at home "like four days a month" - explained: "I look for the positive. I'm doing all these things to enjoy my home that I never get to enjoy." Naomi began to fear catching the virus, which originated from Wuhan, China, as soon as it started to spread around the world and wore a full hazmat suit, gloves and goggles to protect her when she flew on an aeroplane recently. In a YouTube video on her popular 'Being Naomi' channel, she explained: "This is it. This is my precaution. What do you think?" "In all honesty, this is not a funny time. It's not a humorous time. I'm not doing this for laughs. This is how I feel comfortable travelling." After making it to New York safely, Naomi resumed filming to let her fans know that people had been avoiding her during her flight because of her unusual outfit. She said: "Made it back to New York all in one piece. That was a very surreal journey for me. I have to say, when I got on the



plane people moved away from me. There was a guy sitting in front of me, he moved to the right. There was a guy sitting behind me, he moved to the right. Everybody didn't want to be around me but that's cool - I didn't want to be around them either!

But in all seriousness, I think we must take every precaution that makes us protected and comfortable. I'm definitely going to be keeping travelling to a minimum."

Lifestyle | Features

White dress and matching mask: Palestinians brave virus to wed



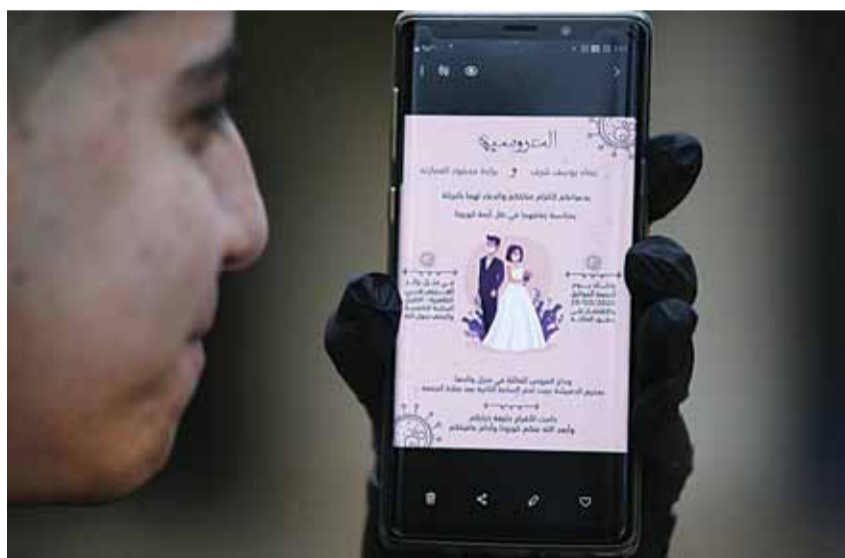
Palestinian bride Bara'a Amareh and her groom Imad Sharaf leave the beauty salon in the Palestinian Deheisheh refugee camp near the West Bank city of Bethlehem.—AFP



A hair dresser wearing a mask puts the finishing touches on Palestinian bride Bara'a Amareh before she leaves the beauty salon.



Palestinian groom Imad Sharaf (right), wearing gloves and a face mask, kisses his father's hand as part of tradition upon arriving home.



Issam Sharaf, brother of Palestinian groom Imad, holds up a phone showing an electronic image of a wedding invitation with a cartoon of both the bride and groom wearing protective masks.

A wedding in the West Bank on Friday saw a twist on a familiar scene: the Palestinian bride wore a long white dress, but with a matching face mask and gloves to protect against the novel coronavirus. As the COVID-19 illness sweeps the globe, public events have been cancelled in droves, including many weddings. Those seeking to plough ahead with their nuptials have had to radically alter their plans.

Baraa Amareh and her fiancé, Imad Sharaf, decided to carry on with their wedding, despite the bride coming from Bethlehem, the epicentre of the novel coronavirus outbreak in the West Bank. Almost all of the 48 COVID-19 cases among Palestinians have been in the Bethlehem govern-

orate. The couple's wedding had been planned months in advance and Sharaf, 25, said they decided not to postpone to show fellow Palestinians that life could continue, despite the pandemic.

The city where Christians believe Jesus was born has been under lockdown, with no one allowed in or out without a permit, for more than two weeks. Sharaf, who comes from a village near Hebron, around 20 kilometers south of Bethlehem, had to get special government permission to enter the city to pick up Amareh and bring her to his hometown for the wedding on Friday. The ceremony was supposed to include dozens of guests, but in the end, the bride and groom were flanked by just a few family members each, standing at a safe distance.

"The conditions and the spread of the virus meant we had to marry without guests and without anyone except my family and the bride's family," Sharaf said. As Amareh has left the locked down area and is therefore considered at risk of having contracted the disease, she will now have to self-isolate for 14 days. Sharaf said that wouldn't be a problem, treating it as a staycation honeymoon. "We are talking about 14 days. I would stay in quarantine with my wife a month or more."—AFP

Coronavirus hits Uruguay's mate drinkers

Much Uruguayan social life revolves around the sharing of a traditional hot herbal infusion called mate, but even that seemingly innocuous practice is under threat from the new coronavirus pandemic. The sight of people walking down the street with a mate gourd cupped in one hand, its metal straw sticking out, and a thermos tucked under the other arm is synonymous with Uruguay. Friends will often relax sharing a single gourd of mate — pronounced mah-tay — through the same metal "bombilla" straw. But Uruguay's government has asked its people not to share bombillas anymore.

It's been a shock to the system for many Uruguayans, like Leonel Garcia who turned down a sip from his sister's mate. "I didn't want to drink it with her!" said the 43-year-old from Montevideo. Uruguayans consume 10 kilograms (22 pounds) a year of yerba mate — the bitter herb infused in piping hot water to make the mate drink — more than anyone else. An average drinker thinks nothing of consuming two liters (four pints) a day. Giving it up is not an option in a country where it's almost an addiction, but the experience is changing. "I haven't stopped drinking mate, simply because I can't, but I've lost ... the spirit of congregation, of closeness, of complicity, of getting together," said Garcia. Mate, which was first produced by the indigenous Guarani people is also popular in Argentina, Paraguay and parts of Brazil and Chile. It is so ingrained in Argentine, Paraguayan and Uruguayan culture that each country has its own separate national mate day.



Impolite not to share

Authorities in Argentina are just as worried as those in Uruguay and have advised against "sharing mate, cutlery and utensils." In Paraguay, the government warned of the risks involved in sharing terere, a yerba mate infusion that is drunk cold or even frozen. "People have to get used to it and stop sharing," Paraguay's Health Minister Julio Mazzoleni told AFP.—AFP

To release or not to release? Music's dilemma over virus

To release or not to release? That is the question haunting the music industry as the coronavirus casts doubt over a slew of forthcoming albums. The Canadian hit-machine Weeknd held his nerve and dropped the 14-track "After Hours" Friday, with the cult British artist Baxter Dury also going ahead even though he admitted that "it's terrible timing". The Weeknd's new album for Universal had been heavily trailed on his YouTube channel, which has 17.7 million subscribers.

The album's dark theme was set by a short film of the same name in which the singer, his face bleeding and beaten, wanders an eerily empty city. Swept up in a kind of unseen panic, the claustrophobic atmosphere is bizarrely prophetic of a world that is now either in lockdown, or fast approaching it, because of the virus. Not that the three-time Grammy winner is immune to what is going on around him now. The streaming king recently tweeted a video of a quarantined DJ playing one of his songs on a balcony in Italy, the country worst affected by the epidemic.

Luckless Bob Geldof

But you have to feel for Bob Geldof, who had just released The Boomtown Rats' first album in 36 years, only for it and the accompanying book and documentary about the Dublin punk band with which he made his name, to be swallowed up in the chaos. "It is what it is," the Live Aid founder told AFP, declaring that with "the world in the state it's in and... that vulgar fool Trump" in the White House, it was time to "make noise".

Geldof, 68, described with glee how paranoia spreads. "I put on my mask on the Eurostar train to Paris. Everyone started looking at each other suspiciously and before you knew it they were all in masks," he said. Dury — son of the punk icon Ian Dury of "Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll" fame — was also grinning and bearing the release of his "The Night Chancers", a fitting soundtrack for urban solitude, despite the widening global shutdown. The songwriter said he didn't want to be seen as cynical. "I don't want to be the guy who's trying to sell records right now," he told AFP. "You have to be sensitive to what's going on."

'Is it indecent?'

As for touring the album, he said "I think we will have to wait six months before having another concert. No one really knows." For now, Dury is hunkering down in his London apartment trying not to "go stir crazy" and helping his son study for exams. Other musicians, however, have preferred to postpone their releases, including French singer Thomas Dutronc, who has Iggy Pop, jazz diva Diana Krall and ZZ Top stalwart Billy Gibbons on his new album "Frenchy". —AFP

Medical TV dramas donate their equipment to emergency workers

Medical TV dramas such as "Grey's Anatomy" are donating equipment including masks, gowns and gloves to emergency workers tackling the coronavirus pandemic. The shows are emptying their prop rooms of materials that are in increasingly short supply as the rapid spread of the disease threatens to overwhelm resources. "Grey's Anatomy," a long-running ABC show, has "a backstock of gowns and gloves which we are donating," said executive producer Krista Vernoff. Firefighter drama "Station 19," from the same network, donated around 300 masks to the Ontario Fire Department in Canada after learning they were running out and fire stations were forced to re-use masks. "They were tremendously grateful," said Vernoff.

Another popular ABC medical drama, "The Good Doctor," shoots in Vancouver, where it has handed over hundreds of masks, gowns, disposable booties and isolation suits. Karen Law, an Atlanta-based rheumatologist, posted an image on Instagram of medical supplies outside the Grady Memorial Hospital, thanking Fox show "The Resident" for the donation. "Yesterday, I had a serious discussion with the residents about how, though supplies are low, a magical shipment of masks is unlikely to arrive," she wrote. "And yet, a magical shipment of masks DID arrive."—AFP



Photo shows 'Greys Anatomy's cast.

'Lovebirds' moves to Netflix as movie theaters face uncertainty

With movie theaters closing down around the world due to coronavirus, Paramount's "The Lovebirds" will skip the big screen and go straight to Netflix, in a landmark move for Hollywood. The decision adds to uncertainty surrounding the movie theater industry, which typically relies on a "theatrical window" before major films are made available for viewing at home. "The Lovebirds" marks the first time a major Hollywood studio has pulled a film from theaters and sent it to Netflix, although a release date has not yet been set.

The romantic comedy, starring Issa Rae and Kumail Nanjiani, sees a couple become accidentally embroiled in a murder mystery. Universal had previously announced it would make upcoming titles such as "Trolls World Tour" available direct to on-demand streaming at the same time as theaters. Disney, with "Frozen 2," had brought forward home release dates for movies already in theaters, via its Disney+ streaming platform. But the majority of big studio releases — including "Mulan," "Black



Widow" and the latest "Fast and Furious" sequel — have simply been postponed. In a recent statement, the National Association of Theatre Owners

rejected as "speculation in the media" that the coronavirus closures could mean more blockbusters heading straight to streaming.—AFP

Will coronavirus slow world conflicts or intensify them?

UNITED NATIONS: Syria, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, the Sahel... with the great powers focused intently on the COVID-19 virus, will armed conflicts across the world decrease in severity or intensify? Experts as well as diplomats at the United Nations say there is a serious risk of the latter. For guerrilla fighters and extremist groups, "it's a clear godsend," said Bertrand Badie, a specialist in international relations at France's Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po). When the "powerful become powerless," he told AFP, one can see "the revenge of the weak over the strong."

In recent days, some 30 Malian soldiers were killed in an attack in northern Mali blamed on jihadists, without drawing any sharp reaction from the Security Council. In Libya, and Syria's Idlib region - the object of intense diplomatic attention before the coronavirus stole the spotlight - fighting continues. Evoking the "potentially devastating impact of #Covid-19 in #Idlib and elsewhere in Syria," the UN undersecretary-general for political affairs, Rosemary DiCarlo, called on Twitter for all parties to show restraint. "If anyone

- incredibly - still needed a reason to stop the fighting there," she added, "this is it."

Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy for Yemen, issued a similar plea: "At a time when the world is struggling to fight a pandemic, the focus of the parties must shift away from fighting one another to ensuring that the population will not face even graver risks." Up to now, these countries have not been afflicted by Covid-19 on the scale seen in China, South Korea or Europe. But the virus carries the potential, once it reaches into poor and conflict-ridden countries, of having a devastating impact.

In the absence of concerted assistance from abroad, the UN fears "millions" could die. The pandemic will not necessarily favor any particular group of belligerents, one diplomat noted, because the ravaging disease has been "uncontrollable". "The pandemic could lead to a worsening of conflicts, with the risk of exacerbating the humanitarian situation and population movements," he said.

But the pandemic might also sap the will of the belligerents and their ability to fight in coming

months, some experts said. "Throwing their troops into battle will expose both states and violent non-state groups to contamination, and thus to potentially catastrophic losses of human life," said Robert Malley, president of the Washington-based International Crisis Group. He believes that the virus "will very certainly diminish the capacity and will of states and of the international system - the UN, regional organizations, refugees, peacekeeping forces - to dedicate themselves to the resolution or prevention of conflicts."

It will also throw up a whole set of new obstacles, he told AFP, complicating access to conflict zones, making it harder to organize negotiations in neutral countries, and diverting financial investments to the fight against the coronavirus. "What government would want to invest in the pursuit of peace in Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, the Sahel or elsewhere when it is facing an economic, social and political crisis almost without precedent?" he asked.

With the news media obsessively focused on Covid-19, Malley said, "these conflicts, however brutal and violent they may be, will for many peo-

ple become unseen and unheard". At the UN, which has been struggling to respond as best it can, diplomats insist that their efforts to monitor regional crises and conflicts will continue, even if the international organization has sharply curbed its schedule of meetings. "We intend to ensure that #UNSC plays its vital role in maintaining global peace and security," Britain's interim ambassador to the UN, Jonathan Allen, wrote on Twitter. "Covid-19 is the major global focus, but we have not forgotten about Syria, Libya, Yemen."

But Richard Gowan, a New York-based specialist in UN matters, expressed some doubt. "Security Council diplomats say that it is hard to get their capitals to focus on UN issues," he said. Among non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dealing with human rights issues, like Human Rights Watch, concern is growing that whole areas of action are falling by the wayside. One example: Diplomats say the much-awaited and repeatedly delayed publication of a UN summary report on the bombing of hospitals in Syria - originally due at the beginning of the year - is now not expected before April, at the earliest. — AFP

Religion in the Mideast adapts...

Continued from Page 1

Leading Muslim clerics have widely backed scientifically-based measures to contain the virus, notably by supporting crowd size restrictions through promotion of home prayer. Authorities in the Gulf Arab states of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain have halted prayers in mosques. In Egypt, the most populous Arab country, religious authorities have ordered a two-week closure of mosques and churches and banned mass communal prayers.

The government in Tunisia - where some worshippers have been praying in front of shuttered mosque doors - said messages from imams will be broadcast to reinforce essential health protections. In Algeria, the azan, or call for prayer which the muezzin issues for the obligatory five daily Muslim prayers, has been modified. Muezzins are now encouraging worshippers to pray at home.

In Iran, authorities closed four key Shiite religious sites. The Islamic republic is one of the three countries hardest hit by the virus with an official death toll of more than 1,500 and over 20,600 confirmed cases. The pandemic reignited a long-standing dispute between the roles of science and religion in Iran, but Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei intervened in support of medical professionals, effectively closing the debate.

In Lebanon, the head of the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement Hassan Nasrallah urged people to abide by government measures. "The virus can be defeated if everyone takes responsibility and plays their part," he said, calling on people to come forward if they develop COVID-19 symptoms. Some churches in Lebanon, a country home to 18 recognized religious sects including a large Christian community, have begun broadcasting the Sunday mass live on social media.

Israel has banned gatherings of more than 10 people, making it impossible for Jews to form the quorum of 10 needed for prayer known as a miyan. But chief rabbinical authorities have decreed that following health ministry guidelines is a religious duty and authorized prayer at home.

Even while top clerics have largely backed containment strategies, resistance has continued among the region's deeply religious and conservative population. Iraq's top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has urged citizens not to gather in large numbers for prayers, where the risk of contamination could be high. But on Saturday tens of thousands turned out to commemorate a revered imam Musa Al-Kadhimi, who died in 799 in the custody of Abbasid caliph Harun Al-Rashid.

That followed a call from influential cleric Moqtada Sadr for his followers to take part in the pilgrimage, defying government advice. The anniversary of the death normally attracts millions to the golden-domed mausoleum of Imam Al-Kadhimi in Baghdad.

Extremist voices in the region have dismissed guidance from health officials and leading religious authorities. After Morocco closed mosques and announced a ban on all non-essential movements, outspoken Salafist preacher Abou Naim decried those moves as "apostasy". He was arrested on terrorism charges. There has also been a proliferation of faith-based responses to the pandemic with no supporting medical evidence.

After the first case emerged last month in Lebanon, many Christians visited the tomb of St Charbel, the country's patron saint, and collected soil from the holy site, believing it would heal those infected. And last week, a Christian priest flew over Beirut in a helicopter to "bless" the country.

Despite the decrees of top rabbis to follow medical guidelines, some Jewish leaders in Israel have offered alternative solutions to the pandemic. Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Simcha Halevi Ashlag has encouraged people to drink the Mexican beer Corona, to fortify their prayers. "When we pray and drink an alcoholic drink, the prayers have more force," he said in a video posted on social media earlier this month. — AFP



JERUSALEM: Palestinians pray in the almost deserted Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of Jerusalem after mosques were shut on Friday. — AFP

Kuwait imposes partial curfew...

Continued from Page 1

UK - two Kuwaitis and two Filipino residents, while one was in contact with a patient recently arrived from Egypt. He added that the sixth case is related to a Kuwaiti citizen who recently arrived from Brazil, noting that for the rest of the cases, their details will be revealed later. Earlier yesterday, Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced that three coronavirus cases have recovered, a Kuwaiti woman and man and a Spanish resident, bringing the number of cases that have recovered in the country to 30.

After a late-night Cabinet meeting on Saturday, the minister of trade and industry said the country's strategic food reserves were "secure and plentiful". KUNA said. He urged people not to stockpile food and said there was no need to panic. In addition, the Cabinet decided to shut all shops and central markets, except for foodstuff stores. Government Spokesman Tareq Al-Mezrem said, asking the Municipality to determine other necessary activities that need to be excluded.

Last week, the Cabinet approved a bill to increase the budget of ministries and governmental

departments by KD 500 million for the 2020/21 fiscal year due to the coronavirus outbreak. It also established a temporary fund for receiving financial contributions from institutions, companies, and individuals to support the government's efforts to fight the virus. The country's stock market has been battered by the virus outbreak as well as a historic plunge in oil prices. Its main index has lost nearly 30 percent of its value since the start of the year.

Saleh added the military is on standby to help security forces in putting the curfew in place, quoting the Cabinet as having tasked the National Guard with aiding the ministry of interior in this regard. He stated that the curfew was decided as a result of non-compliance with health guidelines and instructions aimed at averting gatherings. The minister noted he will relieve residency law violators of any fine so that they can leave the country immediately.

Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said a strengthened health system will undoubtedly make it easy for overseas citizens to return home at an early date. Speaking at the press conference following the Cabinet meeting, the minister reassured that his ministry had worked out a blueprint to evacuate citizens abroad. Urging everyone to take the matter seriously, the minister said the evacuation plan will give top priority to patients in critical situation, elderly people, minors and people with disabilities. — Agencies

China's virus strategy: Model for the world?

BEIJING: The head of the World Health Organization believes China's battle with the coronavirus offers a beacon of hope, but others question whether Beijing's strategy can be followed by other countries - particularly Western democracies. China has reported only one new local infection over the past four days, a seemingly remarkable turnaround given the chaos that surrounded the initial outbreak in the city of Wuhan.

While some experts caution against accepting Beijing's figures at face value, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus insisted China's success "provides hope for the rest of the world". But China is a particular case - a centrally-controlled, top-down, one-party authoritarian state that allows no dissent and can mobilize vast resources on a single issue.

In January, China effectively shut down Wuhan and placed its 11 million residents in effective

quarantine - a move it then replicated in the rest of Hubei province, putting 50 million people in mass isolation. Across the rest of the country, residents were strongly encouraged to stay at home. Hundreds of millions of Chinese live in closed residential complexes where neighborhood committees can police movement in and out - meaning compliance could be closely monitored.

"Containment works," Sharon Lewin, professor of medicine at the University of Melbourne, told AFP. "Two weeks after the closure of Wuhan, which is exactly the incubation period, the number (of infections) started to drop." Extreme social distancing and home quarantines have been used to differing degrees by a rising number of European countries, with some US states following suit.

But an Imperial College London study warned that while that strategy appeared to have succeeded to date in China, it carried "enormous social and economic costs" in the short and long term. "The major challenge of suppression is that this type of intensive intervention package will need to be maintained until a vaccine becomes available (potentially 18 months or more)," it said. If the intervention is relaxed, transmission rates "will quickly rebound", it added. — AFP

India one-day curfew to test...

Continued from Page 1

The move will affect more than 20 million passengers a day and comes after several people tested positive for the virus after trips. Modi also urged Indians to thank medical workers and other emergency personnel by clapping or banging pots and pans for five minutes at 5:00 pm. Residents in numerous cities held a practice session Saturday, generating a deafening cacophony as they stood on their balconies banging cookware.

This "is most likely a dry run for a more prolonged curfew when rather than if the situation deteriorates," Milan Vaishnav, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think-tank, told AFP. India has an overburdened public health system that suffers from a lack of doctors and hospitals and experts said the country would not escape the highly infectious disease. "We are in for a very long fight," warned virologist Shahid

Jameel of biomedical research charity Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance.

Factories, large industrial parks and banks were declaring a shutdown or finding ways to minimise public movement in offices. Vegetable vendors and small tea shop owners were quietly closed down by local police and truck drivers were given free masks and sanitizers at check points on inter-state highways. State leaders urged citizens not to rush to villages to prevent the virus spread but tensions have mounted as angry laborers protested at some bus stations against sudden closures of basic transport services.

Private events, such as weddings, and local elections were cancelled. The federal government was accelerating the production of masks and has allowed deodorant manufacturers to produce sanitizers. India has cancelled most entry visas for people flying in from other countries. Facebook Inc's WhatsApp launched a helpline number to ensure circulation of accurate information after India's technology ministry asked it to ramp up vigilance to prevent spread of misinformation about the virus outbreak. With 400 million users, India is WhatsApp messenger's biggest market. — Agencies

Coronavirus deaths surge...

Continued from Page 1

organizers to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Games. The pandemic has bludgeoned global stock markets, and the United States - the world's biggest economy - is preparing a huge emergency stimulus package that could top \$1 trillion. Millions have been ordered to stay home in the United States. New Jersey on Saturday followed several states in telling residents to stay indoors. And in neighboring New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo warned that the disruption is likely to last for months, not weeks.

"I don't think it's possible in a city of this size for people to maintain it for much longer than three weeks before they start losing it," Yona Corn, a 35-year-old singer, told AFP. "I think there's going to be a big mental health crisis. I worry about what's going to happen to people." The US Food and Drug Administration also approved the first coronavirus test that can be conducted entirely at the point of care for a patient - and deliver results in 45 minutes. Vice President Mike Pence and his wife tested negative for the coronavirus, his press secretary tweeted Saturday. The couple had taken the test after one of Pence's staffers contracted the illness.

The drastic confinement measures follow the example of China, where the lockdown of Hubei province appears to have paid off. Wuhan, Hubei's capital, is where the virus was first detected. France, Italy, Spain and other European countries have ordered people to stay at home, threatening fines in

some cases, while Australia yesterday told citizens to cancel domestic travel plans. Britain has told pubs, restaurants and theatres to close and warned citizens to stop panic-buying.

China reported its first local infection in four days on Sunday. While the number of cases in the mainland has slumped dramatically since the crisis began, there are fears in Asia of "imported" cases from other hotspots like Europe. Thailand yesterday reported its highest daily rise in cases, taking its total to nearly 600, while India went into lockdown with a one-day nationwide "self-imposed curfew".

While the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions are the hardest hit by the virus, the WHO has warned that young people are also vulnerable. Accurate COVID-19 figures are difficult to reach because many of the victims suffered from other illnesses, and infection rates are uncertain because of a lack of testing in many countries. The coronavirus has infected more than 1,000 across Africa too, where healthcare systems are limited and social distancing measures are difficult in crowded cities.

The Middle East also remains on high alert, where Iran - which suffered a major outbreak - yesterday announced 129 new deaths caused by the novel coronavirus, raising to 1,685 the official death toll in one of the worst-hit countries along with Italy and China. Health ministry spokesman Kianouche Jahanpour said more than 1,028 new cases had been recorded in the past 24 hours and a total of 21,638 people had now tested positive for the virus. But the Islamic Republic has refused to join the rest of the world in imposing heavy restrictions. El Salvador joined several central and South American countries in imposing quarantine measures on Saturday, as Colombia announced its first coronavirus death. — AFP

Classifieds

Monday, March 23, 2020

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Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Warm and Partly cloudy with light to moderate freshening at times north westerly wind, with speed of 15 - 50 km/h with a chance for scattered rain and a chance for dust over open areas.

BY NIGHT: Rather cold and Partly cloudy with light to moderate freshening over costal areas north westerly wind, with speed of 12 - 40 km/h with a chance for scattered light rain.

WEATHER WATCH			Fresh wind	
STATION	MAX. EXP.	MIN. REC.	SFC. CHART 22/03/2020 0000 UTC	
KUWAIT CITY	24 °C	16 °C		
KUWAIT AIRPORT	24 °C	16 °C		
ABDALY	25 °C	14 °C		
BUBYAN	- °C	- °C		
JAHRA	25 °C	16 °C		
FAILAKA ISLAND	24 °C	15 °C		
SALMIYAH	21 °C	17 °C		
AHMADI	21 °C	17 °C		
NUWAISIB	24 °C	15 °C		
WAFRA	25 °C	15 °C		
SALMY	25 °C	15 °C		

4 DAYS FORECAST						
DAY	DATE	WEATHER	Temperatures		Wind Direction	Wind Speed
			MAX.	MIN.		
Monday	03/23	Warm	26 °C	12 °C	NW	12 - 35 km/h
Tuesday	03/24	Warm and Clouds will increase gradually	27 °C	13 °C	VRB-SE	06 - 28 km/h
Wednesday	03/25	Warm and Partly cloudy	26 °C	15 °C	SE	15 - 40 km/h
Thursday	03/26	Warm and Partly cloudy with a chance for scattered rain	26 °C	16 °C	SE	15 - 45 km/h

PRAYER TIMES	
Fajr	04:31
Sunrise	05:50
Zuhr	11:55
Asr	15:23
Sunset	18:00
Isha	19:17

RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT	
MAX. Temp.	31 °C
MIN. Temp.	16 °C
MAX. RH	90 %
MIN. RH	16 %
MAX. Wind	SE 46 km/h
TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR.	0 mm

Hospitals

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

Clinics

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

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

Automated enquiry about the Civil ID card is 1889988

EMERGENCY 112

Airlines

Kuwait Airways	171
Jazeera Airways	177
Turkish Airlines	1884918
FlyDubai	22414400
Qatar Airways	22423888
KLM	22425747
Royal Jordanian	22418064/5/6
British Airways	22425635
Air France	22430224
Emirates	22921555
Air India	22456700
Air India EXPRESS	22438185/4
Sri Lanka Airlines	22424444
Egypt Air	22421578
Swiss Air	22421516
Saudia	22426306
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Daily SuDoku

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Friday's Solution

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STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)
 An important lost object, perhaps a paper of some kind, could command the attention of your entire household, Aries. This could prove frustrating at first, because you will know that it has to be somewhere in the house, but you can't find it anywhere! The item may reappear just as you've given up on it, in a place you never would have imagined! Tip: it's probably hidden among other objects.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)
 Someone or something has disappeared, Taurus. Gossip could spread like wildfire as everyone imagines the worst. Listening to rumors probably doesn't appeal to your sense of fairness; nonetheless, you're wondering, too. Your comrades will probably experience a mixture of relief and disappointment when this person/thing turns up. Mystery (mostly) solved!

Gemini (May 21-June 20)
 You could have some paperwork to do today, Gemini, which could make a big difference to your financial future. This could be a contract, settlement, or agreement of some kind. Whatever it is, you may need to seek some assistance before you execute it. The language might be difficult to understand, and some of the clauses might not feel right to you. This can be frustrating, but it's important to do it today.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)
 The study of psychology might be especially appealing today, Cancer. Some new discoveries that you may have heard about in the media could have piqued your interest and might propel you to the library to find books on the subject. This is a good time to pursue this. Your mind is in the right space to understand it, and it could shed a lot of light on those around you, including you!

Leo (July 23-August 22)
 Occult sciences, such as alchemy, phrenology, and astrology, could be singing their siren song to you, Leo. You like to think of yourself as down to Earth and realistic, but today you could find so-called unrealistic fields of knowledge irresistible. You'll also have a special gift for them right now. Read up on the subject and give it a try. You might be surprised at what you discover.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)
 A group activity could lead to discussions of famous unsolved mysteries, Virgo. Jack the Ripper, the Black Dahlia, the truth about O.J. Simpson, and other intriguing problems might capture the interest of everyone present, and might lead to some animated debates over possible solutions. You might want to make mental notes of the ideas everyone comes up with.

Libra (September 23-October 22)
 A young colleague could leave your place of employment under strange circumstances, Libra, and this could come as a shock to you. You may have been quite fond of this person, and find yourself wondering about the truth behind the departure. Gossip may buzz, but don't pay any attention to it. Chances are it's a health problem, but no one, including your colleague, feels comfortable discussing it.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)
 Spiritual occurrences could lead to a very powerful healing experience, Scorpio. Repressed past traumas could come to the surface and be processed and released. This could leave you feeling rather dazed, as this purging could open a gap in your psyche. Don't worry; eventually it will fill with new knowledge and insights instead of psychic garbage! For now, take a walk. It will clear your head and help you deal with it all.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)
 Do you like detective stories, Sagittarius? If so, you may find them useful today as you play the role of Sherlock Holmes. A missing object, intellectual problem, or mystery of some kind could have you curious enough to search for the truth. This is a good way to train your powers of observation, although intuition will probably play a strong role in your success. Go to it, and have fun!

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)
 A business or romantic partner may seem a bit preoccupied with some very serious matters today, Capricorn, and not be likely to share them with you. Asking to talk about it won't work, so you'll probably end up depending on your intuition. Your friend is probably concerned with the health of a family member who may need surgery. Don't feel excluded. Your friend will talk when the time is right. Be patient!

Aquarius (January 20-February 18)
 Some rather extensive and annoying paperwork might need to be dealt with, Aquarius. It will probably require all your attention, so if you can, take care of it first thing in the morning when you're still fresh. This might be a contract or it could be an insurance policy or something else full of unintelligible jargon. Don't be afraid to ask someone familiar with it to explain the language to you.

Pisces (February 19-March 20)
 A young colleague could leave your place of employment under strange circumstances, Pisces, and this could come as a shock to you. You may have been quite fond of this person, and find yourself wondering about the truth behind the departure. Gossip may buzz, but don't pay any attention to it. Chances are it's a health problem, but no one, including your colleague, feels comfortable discussing it.

Apple Word Search

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Sports

Mounting Tokyo 2020 postponement calls put pressure on defiant Olympic chiefs

Athletes lashed out at IOC advice to continue training

PARIS: Pressure mounted on Olympic organisers to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Games on Saturday after the powerful US track and field federation urged for this summer's event to be pushed back due to the coronavirus pandemic.

USA Track and Field became the latest influential sporting body to ask for the Games to be called off after its head Max Siegel "respectfully requested" in a letter that the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) "advocate ... for the postponement of the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo".

USOPC had said it was too soon to axe the July 24-August 9 Games, much like International Olympic Committee (IOC) head Thomas Bach, who said that it would be "premature" to make such a big decision. "The right and responsible

thing to do is to prioritise everyone's health and safety and appropriately recognise the toll this difficult situation has, and continues to take, on our athletes and their Olympic Games preparations," wrote Siegel. USATF joined a growing chorus of calls from sports organisations to push back the Olympics a day after the country's swimming federation asked USOPC to back a postponement until 2021.

"We urge the USOPC, as a leader within the Olympic Movement, to use its voice and speak up for the athletes," USA Swimming CEO Tim Hinchee said in a letter. That request for a delay was echoed on Saturday by France's swimming federation which said that the Games could not be organised properly in the "current context".

The Norwegian Olympic Committee (NOC) quickly followed, saying that it had sent a letter to the IOC on Friday motivated in part by a Norwegian government ban on organised sports activities which had created "a very challenging time for the sports movement in Norway". "Our clear recommendation is that the Olympic Games in Tokyo shall not take place before the COVID-19 situation is under firm control on a global scale," the NOC said in the letter.

The new chairman of the United Kingdom's athletics governing body also questioned the need to hold the Olympics this summer given the uncertainty surrounding the spread of COVID-19, which has killed nearly 11,500 people worldwide. "To leave it where it is is creating so much pressure in the system. It now has to be addressed," head of UK Athletics Nic Coward told the BBC. However, on Friday, Bach defended the IOC's refusal to cancel the Olympics by saying that the Games were further away than other shelved events, such as football's European Championship which was due to start in mid-June and was moved to 2021.

"We are four-and-a-half months away from the Games," Bach told the New York Times. "For us, (postponement) would not be responsible now." Athletes lashed out at IOC advice to continue training "as best they can", with Olympic pole vault champion Katerina Stefanidi accusing the body of "putting us in danger".

"The IOC wants us to keep risking our health, our family's health and public health to train every day?"



IOC 'putting us in danger'

WADA issues dope testing guidelines

MONTREAL: The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) issued new guidelines to facilitate continued testing amid the constraints of the coronavirus pandemic. Noting that the spread of COVID-19 had evolved into "an even greater health and societal emergency" since its March 6 communique, WADA urged Anti-Doping Organizations (ADOs) to act in accordance with restrictions placed by local health authorities "to ensure proper protection of athletes and doping control personnel, while protecting the integrity of doping control programs, particularly in the lead-up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games."

WADA's latest guidelines advise anti-doping organizations to make sure that sample collectors are free from any symptoms of illness. Collectors should also ask athletes if they have any symptoms or if they or anyone at the collection site are in the groups thought to be at heightened risk from COVID-19.

If test collection personnel are found to have contracted the virus, athletes they tested should be informed and vice versa, WADA said. Protective wear such as masks should be used and work surfaces disinfected, and if local conditions limit what testing can occur then ADOs should "consider focusing their testing program on targeted athletes from high risk sports and disciplines," WADA said.

In locations where testing programs can't continue, WADA said, it and other anti-doping organizations and sports federations will work together "once the situation begins to return to normal" to identify gaps in testing "particularly as it relates to

suspended until April 14.

Meanwhile, New Zealand Rugby's broadcast partner is hoping the domestic competition being planned to replace the suspended Super Rugby championship includes an international element at some stage.

The 25th season of Super Rugby was put on hold indefinitely after last weekend's seventh round because of the coronavirus pandemic when the New Zealand government enforced 14-day self-isolation for anyone entering the country.

With the mainly southern hemisphere provincial competition featuring teams from five countries on three continents, a shutdown was inevitable and there are fears the season may be cancelled. As well as denying the teams and unions money through ticket sales, the shutdown is also proving costly for subscription TV channels who rely on sport for their content. "We are obviously seeing some people who no longer wish to subscribe to the sports channels," Martin Stewart, the chief executive of Sky TV New Zealand told Radio Sport this weekend. "I'm hoping that the Super Rugby teams will be back in action shortly in New Zealand. We're very excited about that. We've been working closely with New Zealand Rugby."

"There are a couple of alternatives that will depend on how things develop in terms of travel bans etc. as to whether or not there is an overseas element towards the end or whether it remains purely a New Zealand-based competition."

"But either way, we're hopeful that ... we'll be able to see some great action between all of the Super teams in New Zealand." Australia have already announced that their four Super Rugby teams along with Western Force, the Perth-based team that was cut from the competition at the end of the 2017 season, will also play a domestic competition.

South Africa may run a domestic competition featuring its six Super Rugby and PRO14 sides in a bid to keep players match fit ahead of the Springboks'

Elba and Gregoire-Trudeau subsequently both tested positive for COVID-19. "I want to let you know that I am doing well," Hamilton said in a statement. "There has been speculation about my health, after I was at an event where two people later tested positive for coronavirus."

"I have zero symptoms and it has now been 17 days since I saw Sophie and Idris. I have been in touch with Idris and happy to hear he is OK. "I did speak to my doctor and double checked if I needed to take a test but the truth is, there is a limited amount of tests available and there are people who need it more than I do, especially when I wasn't showing any symptoms at all."

Hamilton has been in isolation since last Friday. The start of the Formula One season has been wiped away by the pandemic with races in Australia, Bahrain, Viet-



TONO: People wearing face masks wash their hands as they queue to see the Tokyo 2020 Olympic flame on display outside the railway station in Tono, Iwate prefecture yesterday. — AFP

nam, China, Netherlands and Spain shelved and the iconic Riviera showpiece in Monaco cancelled.

A season which should have started in Melbourne on March 14 will now not start until Azerbaijan on June 7 at the earliest. Formula One's British-based teams are also hoping to contribute away from the track.

They are working on a plan to manufacture medical equipment needed to fight the coronavirus which up to Friday night had claimed 177 victims in the United Kingdom with the numbers infected set to top 4,000.

The British government and health authorities need more ventilators in intensive care units to deal with respiratory problems caused by the illness. Formula One teams have engineering capabilities that could speed up the production of the units. —AFP

asked a perplexed Stefanidi. World champion fencer Race Imboden of the United States said on Twitter that he was "worried" about the prospect of the Olympics going ahead.

"We keep being told the Olympic Games are happening. Starting to realise it's more important to have the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games."

WADA said anti-doping organizations should continue to obtain information on whereabouts of athletes normally gathered to facilitate out-of-competition testing. Athletes are still responsible for obtaining therapeutic use exemptions and "should be reminded that they can still be tested at any place, any time," WADA said.

With some WADA accredited laboratories already closed and others likely to follow suit, WADA said testing organizations should contact the Montreal-based organization for information on what labs might be able to receive samples.

"While there are no plans to change existing requirements under the World Anti-Doping Program, WADA fully acknowledges the complexities of this unprecedented situation and will ensure its compliance monitoring program provides a level of flexibility and understanding based on the circumstances," WADA said. — AFP



Michael Fatialofa

scheduled tests against Scotland and Georgia in July, South Africa Rugby said on Wednesday.

The unions are not just keen to keep their players fit but to ensure they maintain the income from their broadcast deals, which is vital to the game in the southern hemisphere.

"We are a vital cog in the, currently you'd have to say, fragile sports ecosystem in New Zealand," Stewart said. "Obviously the funding that we're able to provide through the subscriptions that New Zealanders pay for the service is an extremely vital part of the funding system." — Agencies

Multiple tennis doubles Grand Slam winner Mahesh Bhupathi, however, feels delaying the Olympics was the only option in the present scenario. "Olympics is all about having the best of the best competing for the highest prize in sport and in today's scenario where the world is locked down and the training facilities are all shut, that cannot be a reality," the 45-year-old said in a message.

"So in my opinion pushing it to next summer is the only solution, while it's not ideal for all parties, it's probably the only logical solution in the current scenario." — Reuters

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"So in my opinion pushing it to next summer is the only solution, while it's not ideal for all parties, it's probably the only logical solution in the current scenario." — Reuters

Indian athletes join call for Games to be delayed

MUMBAI: Some Indian athletes have joined the clamour for the Tokyo Olympics to be postponed because they have no access to training facilities, which are under lockdown to arrest the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

Calls from athletes and federations for a delay in the Games, which is scheduled to run from July 24 to Aug. 9, have intensified as the flu-like virus has brought sport to a grinding halt across the world.

Countries have sealed borders and enforced lockdowns to fight the pandemic, which has killed around 13,000 people since surfacing in China at the end of last year.

"As an athlete, I obviously want the Olympics to happen but it should not happen," local media quoted India's veteran table tennis player Sharath Kamal as telling Press Trust of India.

"The epicentre of the virus will keep changing, first it was China, now it is Italy and Iran too is badly affected in Asia. I don't see the scenario being safe for the Olympics to start on time."

"Everyone is talking about social distancing but it is one thing which won't be possible at the Olympics. Thousands of athletes would be staying in the same village." The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Tokyo 2020 organisers insist the July 24-Aug. 9 event will go ahead as planned despite the massive spread of the virus.

The Sport and Rights Alliance and the World Players Association have urged organisers to review their plans of going ahead with the Games and ensure regular dialogue with the athletes. The Indian Olympic Association admitted the athletes' preparations for Tokyo have been severely impacted but hoped it would prove to be a temporary blip.

"Coronavirus has already been controlled in China, where it was massive, and we are confident things will come under control in the next two months," IOA secretary general Rajeev Mehta told Reuters by phone.

"We are expecting the IOC to organise the Olympics during its scheduled dates. We will go by what the IOC decides. If the IOC says the Olympics will go on, we will have to participate." Former doubles number one in women's tennis, Sania Mirza, said she would abide by the IOC's decision on the fate of the Games.

Multiple tennis doubles Grand Slam winner Mahesh Bhupathi, however, feels delaying the Olympics was the only option in the present scenario. "Olympics is all about having the best of the best competing for the highest prize in sport and in today's scenario where the world is locked down and the training facilities are all shut, that cannot be a reality," the 45-year-old said in a message.

"So in my opinion pushing it to next summer is the only solution, while it's not ideal for all parties, it's probably the only logical solution in the current scenario." — Reuters

Rugby star Fatialofa in 'miracle' recovery from spine injury

LONDON: Worcester Warriors lock Michael Fatialofa is back walking unaided just weeks after he suffered a serious spine injury in what his wife described on Saturday as a "miracle". The 27-year-old New Zealander underwent spinal surgery in late January after being left paralysed from the neck down following his side's Premiership rugby union match with Saracens early that month.

The operation took place after he was diagnosed with a spinal contusion, a serious condition which causes compression on the spine. "You're witnessing a miracle that even medical professionals can't explain," wrote Fatialofa's wife Tatiana with a video of him walking on Instagram.

"They are so shook by his progress given his critical level of injury. "He was literally paralysed from the neck down just 10 weeks ago and currently spinal cord injuries do not have a clinical cure."

However, the coronavirus outbreak will place restrictions on her being able to visit him as the British government has recommended social distancing and ordered pubs, restaurants and other places where the public congregate to close.

"We've been advised by the hospital that visiting probably will be reduced to only one hour soon and while I understand completely it's still so hard on the heart," she said. Fatialofa — who was a pivotal member of the Hurricanes side that won the 2016 Super Rugby title — has been affected in another way by the coronavirus as Worcester's home game against Harlequins on April 11 was due to act as a fundraiser, but it will not go ahead with the Premiership currently

Lewis Hamilton self-isolating as precaution

LONDON: Six-time Formula One champion Lewis Hamilton says he is self-isolating but will not get tested for coronavirus as others need attention more than him. The 35-year-old Briton said he decided to self-isolate because he had been at the same function in London that actor Idris Elba and Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's wife Sophie Gregoire-Trudeau attended earlier this month.

Sports

Man Utd, Man City unite to help Manchester foodbanks

Premier League eyes June return: Report

LONDON: Manchester United and Manchester City have joined forces to donate a combined £100,000 (\$117,000) to help local foodbanks affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Collections are normally made at home games for both Manchester giants by fans' groups supporting foodbanks, but football in England is suspended until at least April 30 due to restrictions on mass gatherings due to coronavirus.

"We are proud of the role our supporters play in helping local food banks and recognise the increased strain likely to be placed on these charities by the impact of coronavirus," the clubs said in a joint statement. "At a time of challenge for our community, we are pleased to come together with our fans to help vulnerable members of society in a City United." The donation will support the Trussell Trust's 19 foodbank centres in the Greater Manchester area.

United have been taken steps to try to alleviate the burden on their staff and supporters during the crisis. The Red Devils have vowed to pay 3,000 casual staff even for the remainder of the season even if matches at Old Trafford are forced behind closed doors or cancelled.

And fans who travelled to Austria for the Europa League last 16, first leg against LASK only for the game to be played behind closed doors at late notice

were given a £350 (\$415) payment towards travel and accommodation. Britain ramped up its response to the pandemic by ordering pubs, restaurants, cafes and gyms to close.

Meanwhile, English Premier League is tentatively targeting a resumption on June 1 with a view to completing the season over six weeks before making an August start to the 2020-21 campaign, the Sunday Telegraph reported yesterday.

The report said the sketchy plan was a "best-case scenario" aimed at mitigating the heavy losses clubs are sustaining as they continue to pay wages while football remains shut down because of the coronavirus pandemic.

On March 13, all elite level soccer matches in England, including the Premier League, were suspended until April 4 with that stoppage subsequently extended until April 30. The postponement of the Euro 2020 championship for a year, however, has cleared space in the calendar for domestic competitions to finish if the public health situation allows.

Player contracts, some of which end in June, could be an issue although world governing body FIFA has said it is looking into possible 'dispensations'. Under the plan being considered, the Telegraph said, the Premier League and FA Cup competitions would be

Proud of the role our supporters play'



take place in May, have been postponed in line with British and Irish government advice against the staging of sporting events with mass gatherings and travel restrictions.

"We have a responsibility to protect the wellbeing of players, coaches, fans and the wider community, and will not hesitate to take a safety-first approach to our operations over coming months," said Warren Deutrom, Chief Executive of Cricket Ireland.

"We would like to thank the Bangladesh Cricket Board for their helpful cooperation in reaching this

"The AFL has moved to suspend the 2020 AFL premiership season at the conclusion of this weekend's matches," chief executive Gillon McLachlan told reporters at halftime of the match between Hawthorn and Brisbane at Melbourne Cricket Ground.

"We'll also suspend the AFL Women's season because of the continuing spread of the COVID-19 virus. Games will be suspended until May 31. We will review the situation by the end of April to see if a further period of suspension is required."

The match between Hawthorn and Brisbane would be completed, McLachlan, as would Sunday evening's match between West Coast Eagles and Melbourne in Perth. McLachlan said the league was still hoping to play all 144 matches scheduled and would be prepared to "go as late as possible" into the year to complete the season.

The AFL Women's season was suspended at the semi-final stage and there would be no championship awarded this year, McLachlan said.

The state border closures have hit Rugby Australia's plans to run a domestic competition in the wake of the suspension of five-nation Super Rugby championship and are also going to give the A-



MANCHESTER: Manchester United and Manchester City have donated a combined £100,000 to help food banks in Greater Manchester is a huge boost for the Foodbank Support Appeal.

League resumed with matches played behind closed doors.

The 2020-21 campaign would get underway after a short break on Aug. 8, the report said, allowing the

league to fulfil its commitments in the second season of three-year broadcast deals worth 9.2 billion pounds — Agencies

Ireland-Bangladesh cricket postponed

LONDON: Ireland's seven-match series against Bangladesh became on Saturday the latest casualty to be inflicted on the cricket calendar by the coronavirus pandemic.

The three one-day internationals in Belfast and four Twenty20 matches in England, scheduled to

Australian rules season suspended after lockdown

SYDNEY: The Australian Football League's (AFL) attempt to forge on with the season despite the coronavirus outbreak lasted just one round before it was shut down yesterday in the wake of a government crackdown on non-essential travel.

The AFL, which runs the top flight Australian rules league, the National Rugby League (NRL) and soccer's A-League had decided to press on with their seasons behind closed doors last week after bans on gatherings of more than 500 people.

With Western Australia and South Australia joining Tasmania and Northern Territory in closing their borders on Sunday, however, continuing an AFL competition with 18 teams ranged across five states looked increasingly untenable.

Dybala, Maldini test positive for coronavirus

ROME: Argentina striker Paulo Dybala said Saturday that he has become the third Juventus player to test positive for coronavirus while former AC Milan defender Paolo Maldini revealed that he and his son have also been infected.

"Hi everyone. I just wanted to let you know that we have received the Covid-19 test results and that Oriana (Sabatini, his girlfriend) and I are positive," the 26-year-old Dybala tweeted.

"Fortunately, we are perfectly fine. Thank you for your messages." Italian champions Juventus said that Dybala had been self-isolating since Wednesday. "He will continue to be monitored. He is well and is asymptomatic," said the club in a statement.

Later Saturday, the club said Maldini, now the technical director at Milan, and his 18-year-old son Daniel, a youth team player, were also battling the disease. "Paolo and Daniel are both well and have already completed two weeks at home without contact with others," said a statement from AC Milan.

"They will now remain in quarantine until clinically recovered, as per the medical protocols outlined by the health authorities." Maldini, 51, is considered one of the greatest defenders of all time. He won five Champions Leagues with Milan and appeared in 647 matches.

Juventus teammates Daniele Rugani and Blaise Matuidi have also tested positive for the disease which claimed almost 800 more lives on Saturday, bringing the total in Italy to 4,825.

Earlier, Crystal Palace winger Wilfried Zaha has offered free accommodation to medical staff in his London properties as they treat patients with coronavirus. The 27-year-old Ivory Coast international is the latest football personality to offer a free bed, following in the footsteps of former Manchester United star Gary Neville and Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich.



Paulo Dybala

Zaha, reported to earn £130,000 (\$150,000) a week at the Premier League club, willingly took up the baton saying he had friends working in the National Health Service and he could provide accommodation for the hard-pressed staff who could not return home after their shifts.

He has built up a property portfolio of around 50 properties in London, including in trendy Notting Hill. The flats are usually used by corporate clients but with global travel severely restricted there is not much call for them at the moment.

"If you do good, good will come to you," said Zaha cited in The Times on Saturday. "It is clear that my intentions are that all I want to do is help at every opportunity, especially in the crazy period we are going through.

decision, and we shall work with them at establishing new dates for the series when we are all in a position to plan for the future with greater certainty."

The United Kingdom is entering a second weekend of sporting shutdown that is expected to last for at least a couple of months. No professional cricket will be played in England and Wales before May 28 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pubs, restaurants and gyms across the UK were closed on Friday, while schools will remain open only for the children of key workers to try and halt the spread of the virus. — AFP

League problems in finishing its season.

Football Federation Australia (FFA) said it would continue to assess the situation.

"FFA will consider the outcomes of the national cabinet meeting this evening and provide further advice on the A-League season tomorrow," it said in a statement.

The second weekend of the NRL season continued without crowds yesterday and administrators were initially bullish about pressing on to week three of the competition.

"If the health authorities allow it, we will be still playing," rugby league commission chairman Peter V'landys told Sydney's Daily Telegraph.

V'landys warned last weekend of "catastrophic" losses for the league if they were unable to proceed with the season and called on the government to provide financial aid.

Although the AFL is the most profitable of the competing football codes, McLachlan said they were facing the "biggest financial crisis" in the league's history. "To say that this is the most serious threat to our game in the last 100 years is an understatement," he said. — Reuters

Football's transfer industry grinds to a halt

PARIS: With football having ground to a halt because of the coronavirus pandemic, the usual transfer rumour mill has fallen silent and nobody cares much where Neymar or Paul Pogba might be playing next season.

Nobody even knows when next season might be, and the financial impact on football clubs, and therefore the transfer market, is likely to be significant. A study by KPMG this week estimated that cancelling the rest of this season would cost clubs across Europe's top five leagues as much as four billion euros (\$4.33 billion) in lost revenue. The knock-on effect could be enormous, trickling down to smaller clubs worldwide. After all, look at a club like Monaco, who have raked in huge sums in recent years from selling players like Kylian Mbappe, who went to Paris Saint-Germain in 2018 for 180 million euros. They have then invested that money in new recruits, helping spread the wealth.

"Given the international situation, clubs are going to be less inclined to pay the kind of sums we look for," admitted Monaco's vice-president, Oleg Petrov. Nevertheless, beyond worrying about who Mbappe, Neymar or Pogba could sign for, there is a more pressing concern.

WHAT ABOUT PLAYERS OUT OF CONTRACT?

UEFA's commitment to ending the European season by June 30 was surely partly because it is common practice for contracts to run until that date. Players like Manchester City's David Silva, William at Chelsea, or Paris Saint-Germain's Thiago Silva and Edinson Cavani, will be free to leave on July 1 even if the season has not been completed. FIFA has set up a working group which could amend rules on transfers and make changes to "protect contracts for both players and clubs". However, clubs are already having to take drastic action to stave off financial disaster. Some French sides, including Lyon, put their players on short-time working as a means of saving money. Swiss outfit Sion cancelled the contracts of nine players who refused to go on temporary unemployment.

In Scotland it is not unusual for player contracts to expire immediately after the scheduled last game of the season in May. In any case, struggling Hearts have asked players and staff to accept 50 percent pay cuts. Meanwhile, young players who are out of contract are a problem, points out David Vendtelli, a French agent whose company Score represents Arsenal's Alexandre Lacazette among others. "Things are on hold for these players who are in a precarious position. They are the ones who are the most in danger," he says.

More free agents might find themselves on the market, but the biggest Champions League stars are unlikely to be impacted.

CHANGED DYNAMICS?

Super-agents will keep playing the game, like Mino Raiola, whose clients include Pogba and Borussia Dortmund's Erling Braut Haaland.

Raiola told Spanish sports daily Marca this week that he hoped "to one day transfer a massive player to Real Madrid" and would "try to do it this summer". Elsewhere, the dynamics of the market may change. "In some ways people will be eyeing up bargains," says one agent with in-depth knowledge of the British market. "A distressed club becomes a motivated seller, so there will be a fire sale of a distressed club selling its assets." However, the reality is that nothing is happening right now. "Nobody wants to get involved in that sort of thing now. Our primary job at the moment is to make sure all our staff are looked after," says Jonathan Barnett, whose clients include Gareth Bale. — AFP

18 Rugby star Fatialofa in 'miracle' recovery from spine injury



19 Man Utd, Man City unite to help Manchester foodbanks



19 Dybala, Maldini test positive for virus



US athletics federation calls for Olympic delay



TONO: The Tokyo 2020 Olympic flame is displayed outside the railway station in Tono, Iwate prefecture yesterday. The flame arrived in Japan to a scaled-down welcoming ceremony on March 20 as doubts grew over whether the 2020 Tokyo Olympics will go ahead on schedule as the deadly COVID-19 coronavirus causes chaos around the world. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: United States athletics' governing body joined calls for the Tokyo Olympics to be postponed on Saturday, urging US Olympic chiefs to push for the Games to be delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In a letter to the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC), USA Track and Field chief Max Siegel said forging ahead with Olympic preparations "would not be in the best interest of our athletes."

The USATF call for a postponement echoed a similar request by USA Swimming on Friday after the USOPC said it was too soon to postpone the July 24-August 9 Games. Siegel urged the USOPC to support a postponement, citing the health and safety of athletes as well as disruption to training and competition schedules caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

"Our athletes are under tremendous pressure stress and anxiety, and their mental health and wellness is among our highest priorities," Siegel said. "The right and responsible thing to do is to prioritize everyone's health and safety and appropriately recognize the toll this difficult situation has, and continues to take, on our athletes and their Olympic Games

preparations.

"For those reasons, USATF is respectfully requesting that the US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) advocate to the IOC for the postponement of the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo."

Siegel acknowledged that there "were no perfect answers" to what was a "very complex and difficult decision." "But this position at least provides our athletes with the comfort of knowing that they will have adequate time to properly prepare themselves physically, mentally and emotionally to be able to participate in a safe and successful Olympic Games, and that they can shift their focus toward taking care of themselves and their families," he said.

"We urge the USOPC, as a leader within the Olympic movement, to use its voice and speak up for the athletes." On Friday, USOPC chairwoman Susanne Lyons said there was no need for the IOC to

make an immediate decision on a possible postponement of the Tokyo games, insisting that organisers had time on their side.

"I think we would concur with the IOC to say that we need more expert advice and information than we have today to make a decision," Lyons said. "And we don't have to make a decision. Our games are not next week, or two weeks from now. They're four months from now."

"So we are affording the IOC the opportunity to gather that information and expert advice. At this point in time, we do not feel that it's necessary for us to insist that they make a decision."

However, the USOPC position met with immediate resistance, with USA Swimming issuing an open letter calling for Olympic chiefs to seek a postponement. "We urge the USOPC, as a leader within the Olympic Movement, to use its voice and speak up for the athletes," USA Swimming chief executive Tim Hinchey

wrote. "The right and responsible thing to do is to prioritize everyone's health and safety and appropriately recognize the toll this global pandemic is taking on athletic preparations," he added. The calls for an Olympic postponement by US federations mirror requests in other countries. France's swim federation has also called for a delay, along with British track and field's governing body.

Retired US track and field star Ashton Eaton, a double Olympic decathlon champion, said on Twitter that delaying Tokyo for a year was the only sensible option. "Tokyo 2021. Nothing else makes sense," Eaton wrote. "Anything else is socially irresponsible."

"How can the IOC and Japanese NOC in good conscience hold one of the world's largest and most important gatherings and risk facilitating the acceleration of global contagion and having the worst event in history?"

"Most evidence ... showed Tokyo2020 is/was set to be one of the best Olympics in history," he added. "Japan, the athletes, the sponsors, the fans, local businesses: all deserve the best shot at that. 2020 is not it." — AFP

Former Real Madrid president Sanz dead after contracting virus

MADRID: Former Real Madrid president Lorenzo Sanz, who was hospitalised with coronavirus, died on Saturday at the age of 76, his son announced. Sanz was in charge of the Spanish giants from 1995-2000, overseeing two Champions League titles.

"My father has just passed away. He did not deserve this ending and in this way," tweeted his son, Lorenzo Sanz junior. "One of the best, bravest and hardest-working people I have ever seen. His family and Real Madrid were his passions."

Three days ago, Sanz Jr., a former professional basketball player, said that his father had been admitted to a Madrid hospital after suffering the symptoms of the coronavirus which has killed more than 1,320 people in Spain. Sanz claimed a place on the Real Madrid board

in the mid-1980s, when the president was Ramon Mendoza. He replaced Mendoza as president in 1995. With Jupp Heynckes as coach and star players such as Davor Suker, Roberto Carlos, Clarence Seedorf, Fernando Hierro and Raul, Real won the Champions League in 1998 by beating Juventus in the final.

It was their seventh European Cup but first in 32 years. Two years later, in Paris, Real claimed an eighth by beating Valencia in the final. However, that same year, Sanz was ousted as president by Florentino Perez, who opened a new era at the club, adding five more Champions Leagues in two decades.

Current club captain and Spanish international Sergio Ramos, who with teammates is in quarantine after one of the club's basketball players tested positive for the virus, hailed Sanz. "Very sad day for Real Madrid. Lorenzo Sanz connected yesterday and today with two numbers for history — 7 and 8," tweeted Ramos in reference to the key Champions League titles.

"His death saddens us even more in these difficult days in which we find ourselves. My deep condolences to his family and friends. Rest in peace."

Meanwhile, Mexican football league president Enrique Bonilla has tested positive for the coronavirus that

has forced the competition to shut down, he announced. In a statement posted on the Mexican league (Liga MX) web site on Friday night, Bonilla said he had been tested for COVID-19 and was positive.

"I do not have any serious symptoms and will remain quarantined in line with the instructions of the Ministry of." The Mexican League suspended play indefinitely after last Sunday's matches due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Matches had been staged through March 13 as normal, then were played in empty stadiums. "Of course, I will keep up to date with the situation our country is experiencing and the alternatives and possible solutions to solve the situation that the Liga MX family is going through," Bonilla said.

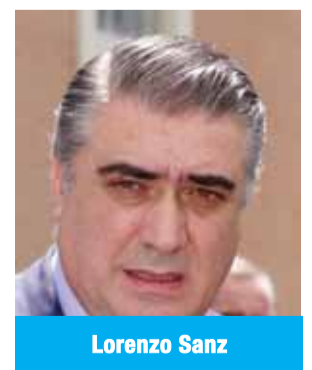
"I assure you I'll act with all responsibility in the face of what we are experiencing and I'm sure that, as a team, the country will be able to succeed." Cruz Azul top the table after 10 matches in the 18-team league with 22 points, just ahead of Leon.

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Lorenzo Sanz