



Amir heads Cabinet session, hails coronavirus measures

One new case in Kuwait • MoCI to pay difference in food freight costs

Curfew in Saudi; UAE shuts malls; Weinstein infected

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's King Salman has announced a nationwide dusk-to-dawn curfew from yesterday in a bid to limit the spread of the new coronavirus, the latest in a series of restrictions. The curfew - from 7 pm until 6 am - will be imposed for 21 days, the official Saudi Press Agency reported, citing a royal order. The move comes after Saudi Arabia on Sunday said the number of COVID-19 cases had jumped to 511, the highest in the Gulf. The kingdom has reported no deaths so far.

Health sector employees as well as security and military officials will be exempt from the curfew restrictions, the royal order said. Saudi Arabia's King Salman warned on Thursday of a "more difficult" fight

ahead against the virus, as the kingdom faces the double blow of virus-led shutdowns and crashing oil prices. The Arab world's biggest economy has shut down cinemas, malls and restaurants, halted flights and suspended the year-round umrah pilgrimage as it steps up efforts to contain the deadly virus.

Last week, the kingdom unveiled stimulus measures amounting to 120 Saudi billion riyals (\$32 billion) to support businesses and said it plans to raise borrowing to 50 percent of GDP. Saudi Arabia has also suspended prayers inside all its mosques except the holiest two sites in Islam in Makkah and Madinah, a sensitive move in the deeply conservative Muslim kingdom.

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KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah headed yesterday the Cabinet's extraordinary session at Dar Salwa, accompanied by HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, and Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Ali Jarrah Al-Sabah.

On Sunday, HH the Amir lauded extensive measures carried out by Kuwaiti authorities and people of the country to counter the spread of COVID-19, stressing that it was time to expand solidarity to overcome this global health crisis. In a televised address, HH the Amir reflected on the situation created by the coronavirus worldwide, saying that Kuwait, unfortunately, had been affected by the global pandemic that has killed tens of thousands and infected over 300,000.

HH Sheikh Sabah indicated that he directed the government of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah to take measures ensuring the safety of the people of Kuwait, both nationals and residents. "I have been following up with great pleasure the sequence of steps as well as bold and decisive measures taken by government bodies to counter the pan-



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah addresses the nation on Sunday. — KUNA

demic," affirmed the Amir, commending the efforts of all government officials and staff to battle the coronavirus.

HH the Amir said he had directed state bodies to contact Kuwaiti citizens and stu-

dents abroad to ensure they are safe and make their travel back to the country as easy as possible and in accordance with health guidelines.

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V O L V O

STAY SAFE STAY HOME



Defense Minister discusses with officials anti-coronavirus action

Interior Ministry prioritizes elderly, disabled in granting waivers to curfew rules

In My View

Curfew Diaries: Day 1



By Jamie Etheridge

The sky was a brilliant glowing orange and rosy pink at 5 pm yesterday, just as the sun began sinking toward the horizon. We sat on our small balcony, awaiting the siren that would mark the start of Kuwait's nationwide curfew, a first experience for me and my family. But at 5 pm we heard only the garble of someone speaking in Arabic through a loudspeaker, incomprehensible and far away.

I was disappointed, wanting and almost needing the loud, piercing drama of the civil defense sirens as a way to mark this new era - life under curfew in Kuwait. The curfew is only partial - from 5 pm to 4 am - and much of normal life continues during the day, unabated.

The curfew is both scary and reassuring, a sign of the seriousness of the pandemic and at the same time, of the government's determination to arrest its spread, to protect all of us and keep the country safe and healthy.

I am both comforted and terrified. Cooped inside the shelter of my flat, working from home when I can while my children play and read and squabble around me, life seems utterly, boringly normal. I've ventured out a few times, to go to the office and to the grocery, and each time the world seems perfectly sane.

But at the same time, in other parts of the world, life has come to a crashing halt and hundreds have died or are dying daily. In Kuwait, there may be danger lurking on the hand rails of the grocery carts at the jamiya (co-op society) or in the cough of a colleague at a press conference. Death, or at least serious illness, has found a new, devious means of reaching us inside the safe bubble of our everyday lives.

The pandemic cares not for national borders, age or education. It is certainly worse for the aged and infirm, for those with comorbidities. But all of us are vulnerable and many of us won't survive. It seems like a nightmare, something from the Middle Ages when the plague swept through Europe. What we have from those times are the stories and histories of those who survived, who witnessed the horror.

What we have now are the heroes of the modern age - the doctors, nurses, lab techs and hospital staff who risk their own health daily to save the lives of the infected, while protecting the rest of us. There are also the everyday heroes like police officers, delivery drivers and cooks, domestic helpers and grocery store clerks, government officials and others who are linked arm-in-arm in a protective chain, holding the everyday world together as we battle for survival, for normalcy.

But these are not normal times. The coronavirus COVID-19 has now infected more than 338,000 people worldwide, with nearly 15,000 deaths (as of Monday, March 23). It has spread across the world and continues to pull under its weight not only the vulnerable, the elderly and the immunocompromised, but all of us.

Ten days ago, Kuwait closed its airport to commercial flights and the lockdown began. Tens of thousands of people work from their homes or not at all, many of them losing their salaries or their income. Schoolchildren are 'homeschooling' and all public places have been closed, including mosques, beaches, parks, mass transit, malls, salons, spas, day-care centers and all government ministries and departments. The economy, our livelihoods, and the fabric of our society will all be transformed by this pandemic in ways we can't even see yet.

The government has asked since the beginning for people to stay home and not go out except for food and necessities. But many people ignored the request and carried on with life as normal, resulting in the curfew.

The curfew. A new not-normal: a pandemic-induced normal that is meant to keep us safe but is as terrifying simply for what it means. Now we have no choice but to acknowledge the threat and to adjust, to find a way to survive and thrive even as the world threatens to collapse around us. The curfew may prove the greatest hero of all, the competitive advantage that gives humanity the upper hand over this pandemic.



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah meets with top officials to discuss precautions against the spread of coronavirus. — KUNA photos



Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh is seen during an inspection tour at the security waivers center in Al-Adan.



Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh is seen during a field tour at major cross-roads and highways.

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah discussed on Sunday with top officials the package of measures that have been enforced in the country against the novel pandemic, coronavirus. Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour met with Interior Ministry Undersecretary Lt Gen Essam Al-Nahham, Undersecretary of the National Guard Lieutenant General Hashim Al-Rifai and Director General of Kuwait's Fire Service Directorate (KFSD) Lieutenant General Khaled Al-Mekrad, discussing precautions that have been taken in implementation of the cabinet decisions to face spread of coronavirus. The army said in a statement that the officials discussed during the meeting coordination and joint action by the ministries of defense and interior, the guards and the fire department, as part of the fight against the pandemic. Sheikh Ahmad was briefed during the meeting about measures taken by the various security sectors to back up all state departments in the emergency situation. The discussions also dealt with preparing new quarantines.

Minister Anas Al-Saleh said Sunday that security forces and Kuwait National Guard personnel would enforce the law during the partial curfew, which aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus. Saleh made the remarks during a field tour at major cross-roads and highways to see first-hand compliance with the daily curfew, which was imposed by the

anyone caught breaching the curfew will be jailed for up to three years and fined KD 10,000 pursuant to Civil Defense Law.

Elderly people

In the meantime, Saleh said that the security institution takes into consideration conditions of elderly people and persons with disabilities while issuing permits to exempt them from restrictions relating to curfew. Saleh reminded all personnel of the security institution of the need to make life easier for those people, according to a press release from the Interior Ministry's Public Relations and Security Media Department. He made the comments after making an inspection tour at the security waivers center in Al-Adan. Accompanied by Lt Gen Nahham, they were briefed on the regulations set for issuing security permits regarding the persons entitled for these waivers and operating system of the center as well as the controls on movement of individuals during the partial 11-hour curfew. The minister commended the preparedness of security personnel to deal with the current emergency, appreciating the cooperation shown by everybody, the statement added. — KUNA

Security forces enforce curfew

government to start from 5:00 pm until 4:00 am, the Ministry of interior said in a statement. Saleh, also Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, urged security forces to deal decisively with anyone violating the curfew. Saleh commended the security forces in enforcing the curfew, which ultimately aimed at preserving wellbeing of public. Saleh warned earlier that

Enforce the law

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister and Interior



Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has so far recorded 189 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 702 have been discharged from quarantine 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. There are 159 people receiving treatment and 240 quarantined as of yesterday. 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)

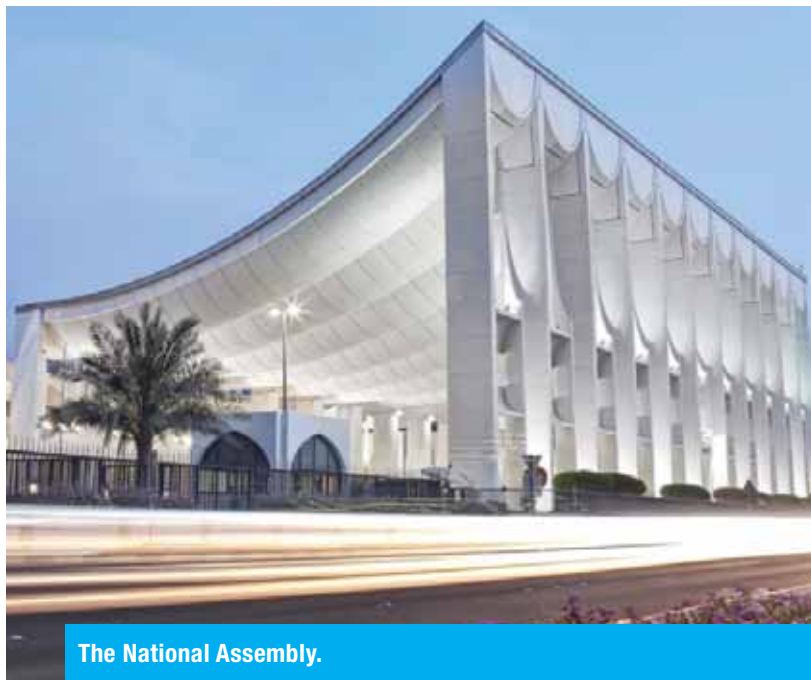
Local

Kuwait parliament holds extraordinary session to discuss diseases-related bills

Lawmakers undergo swab tests at National Assembly

KUWAIT: The National Assembly holds an extraordinary session today to discuss a set of emergency draft laws aimed at curbing spread of coronavirus in specific and toughen penalties against anyone violating communicable disease laws. Parliamentarians will discuss a bill and two proposals to amend a law regarding preventive measures over communicable diseases. The government, in its meeting last Monday, approved a bill to amend article 17 of Law No 8 (1969) with the aim of toughening penalties to up to three months in prison or up to a KD 5,000 fine, against anyone who violated medical and preventive requirements of communicable diseases. They also approved amendments of article 15 of the same law to increase fines and prison sentence against anyone violating pandemic-related measures. The government also introduced a new penalty against any person who knows he is infected with a communicable disease and deliberately transmits the disease to others. This person will be sent to prison for up to five years or fined between KD 10,000-50,000.

National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said the session would exclusively discuss draft emergency legislations to scale up the combat against the novel coronavirus. "The majority of the other



The National Assembly.

agenda topics of the session will be deferred to dates to be agreed by the MPs and the Assembly's Secretariat," he told reporters at the Assembly. "In preparation for today's session, the Assembly has enforced all safety precautions outlined by the Ministry of Health; these include bringing down the attendance of the Secretariat staff to the minimum and cutting short the time of the session," Ghanem disclosed.

Medics of the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health conducted on Sunday swap tests for members of the National Assembly and staff of the parliament secretariat general at the parliament headquarters. The medical team tested the legislators ahead of the session. Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah was present at the parliament hall when the medical team took saliva samples for the tests. — KUNA

Hospital visiting hours from 1 to 3 pm

By A Saleh

KUWAIT: Ministry of Health (MOH) Undersecretary Dr Mustafa Redha adjusted hospital visiting hours to cope with the current circumstances and the precautionary measures followed to limit the spread of COVID-19. According to the decision Redha issued, hospital visiting hours will be from 1 to 3 pm according to the same related regulations in order to ensure patients' safety and cope with the current health situation.

Curfew passes

Kuwait National Petroleum Company's (KNPC) fire and safety manager Abdullah Mohammed Al-Ajmi said that in view of the Cabinet's decision to impose a partial daily curfew from 5 pm till 4 am until further notice, company employees and contractors will be allowed to move around during curfew hours using special curfew passes. Ajmi also issued a directive urging all employees to fully abide by Ministry of Interior (Moi) regulations in this regard to avoid penal measures set by MoI for violators.

Home delivery

Chairman of Kuwait Union for Consumer Cooperative Societies (KUCCS) Meshal Al-Sayyar announced that all co-ops had been instructed to follow special work timings during the current partial curfew hours, noting that subsidized ration branches will be open from 8 am till 4 pm Saturday to Thursday (Fridays off),

and that all supermarkets and their branches will be open only till 4 pm and closed during curfew hours.

Sayyar added home delivery services have been activated around the clock using volunteers from the area's residents and that co-op managers will be responsible for organizing work and submitting official letters to MoI including the names of executives and other workers who will be working during curfew hours so that special curfew passes could be made for them.

Sayyar said delivery services will only use K-Net payments and advised consumers to rationalize their purchases of basic goods. He also noted that security officers will continue working 24/7 and that restaurants will continue working behind closed doors during curfew hours to provide delivery services without allowing customers in.

Sayyar said according to the decision, co-ops will be able to keep staff members inside closed supermarkets during curfew hours so that they can restock shelves and receive goods, provided their names are provided to MoI to issue curfew passes for them. "This decision is the result of several meetings held with relevant bodies in relation to the current circumstances and the curfew. It is also a continuation of our previous directive issued on March 21 on regulations various co-ops should strictly follow until further notice," Sayyar concluded, noting that special teams will tour co-ops to make sure it is fully implemented.



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets with the Head the National Union of Kuwaiti Students Falah Al-Ajmi. — KUNA

Kuwaiti Foreign Minister receives NUKS chief

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received on Sunday the Head the National Union of Kuwaiti Students (NUKS) Falah Al-Ajmi. During the meeting, Sheikh Ahmad affirmed the importance that the ministry attaches to the contribution of students' unions abroad in spreading awareness to Kuwaiti students regarding the repercussions of the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19), the ministry said in a press statement. The foreign minister praised the efforts made by the union and its contribution in supporting Kuwaiti unions abroad, urging the importance of their cooperation with Kuwaiti diplomatic missions in spreading awareness towards adherence to the instructions issued by the state regarding this health crisis. The meeting was attended by Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Consular Affairs Minister Plenipotentiary Sami Al-Hamad, Deputy Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Minister of Foreign Affairs Office Adviser Ahmad Al-Shuraim and a number of senior officials in the ministry.

Sheikh Ahmad on Sunday telephoned his Lebanese counterpart Nassif Hitti, in line with instructions by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, to express to the Lebanese

leadership and people His Highness' solidarity with Lebanon in the current hard circumstances due to spread of coronavirus. The foreign minister relayed His Highness the Amir safety wishes for the brotherly people of Lebanon. Meanwhile, minister Hitti expressed gratitude for this gesture from the State of Kuwait, namely His Highness the Amir and the people, wishing safety for everyone.

In other news, Kuwait's embassy in Warsaw said that it is following up daily on the condition of Kuwaiti citizens in Poland, including cadet officers. Kuwait's Ambassador to Poland Khaled Al-Fadhli said that the embassy has formed a special team to follow up on condition of the 106 Kuwaiti nationals currently located in the European country. The mission has booked rooms for the citizens at one of the most luxurious hotels in the capital Warsaw and the northern city of Gdansk, pending their return home, he clarified. All necessities have been secured for the Kuwaiti citizens in line with instructions by political leadership namely His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. All cadet officers who reside at the Polish naval academy in the city of Gdynia are well, he said urging all Kuwaitis in Poland to contact the mission at the phone number: 0048795542647. — KUNA

MoH underlines importance of staying at home

KUWAIT: As a result of the new partial curfew to curb the spread of coronavirus, Ministry of Health Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad underlined the importance for everyone to stay at home and avoid contacts when leaving the house for the sake of everyone's health. At the daily conference, Sanad said the new virus, no matter how dangerous, "we can reverse its course, but we need to fully understand and have faith in our ability to do so, and limit its spread, and that is not impossible." He added that this was proven through work conducted in the Chinese city of Wuhan, which was the focus of where the virus was first detected, but now things are changing and other areas became the focus of this virus.

Meanwhile, in Kuwait, he stated that

only one confirmed case of coronavirus infection was confirmed in the past 24 hours, and it belongs to a Kuwaiti female citizen who traveled to UAE recently, bringing the number of infections in the country to 189 cases. Sanad added that the number of cases receiving medical care has become 159, while the number of cases that has recovered completely remained at 30 cases. The spokesperson noted the number of cases receiving intensive medical care has remained at five cases, three of them in critical conditions and two are stable. Regarding quarantine people, Sanad pointed out that the total number of those who ended the quarantine period has reached 702 people, adding that the number of test samples has reached 17,010 cases. — KUNA



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Local

Tough times for workers: Salary cuts, unpaid vacations as work slows down

Once thriving part-time jobs most affected by the crisis

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Several workers from various companies in Kuwait are experiencing tough times and are wondering whether they will get their salaries for this month and the next. One company forced its employees to resign, others offered vacations without pay, while some completely stopped work without pay for workers. There are also workers who are staying at home but receiving salaries.

"My company said they will pay us and told us to stay at home until the crisis is over. Thank God my company understands," said Amador, a salesman at a Salmiya mall. "What is missing in our salary is the commission plus overtime. For me, I need those too, because I am paying for my condominium back in my country. Now, I will only get the regular salary, which is barely enough to pay my house rent and a little to send to my family home," he said.

A bilingual school teacher also received her salary early this month; however, she is afraid for

her April salary. "The ministry has assured they will give us the salary, but at the end of the day, it's the decision of the management that will prevail. After the submission of grades, we were told to take our



Laborers afraid for April salary

vacation, since the government decided to completely suspend classes until August. We will go back to our countries once flights resume," she said. There are some workers in Kuwait whose jobs

are considered as part-time. Although illegal, they used to thrive, but are now the most affected by the crisis. "My problem is that I bought my visa from a Kuwaiti man," said Lovely, who works as tea-girl at a school canteen, at a Filipino restaurant in Salmiya and as a cleaner at a clinic in Maidan Hawally. "I do three different jobs as a part-timer; all these jobs are now no longer operational because of the coronavirus. Now it means I will not get any money this month and the next because they are all closed. I am afraid because I have a child here, and I don't know where to get money from - the money I get from three jobs is barely enough for us," she rued.

Another worker, Meliza, has also been informed by her company that her March salary will be cut in half. "I work in a flower shop, but they have told me since there are no regular orders from our hotel customers, they cannot provide me with the whole salary," she said. "I understand the situation but I also have expenses, and I don't wish crises like these to happen," she said.

Foreign teachers anxious over exit permit news

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education Saud Al-Harbi announced on Sunday orders to issue exit permits for expat teachers teaching in the public school system to leave the country. There are approximately 70,000 public school teachers in Kuwait, the majority of which are Arab nationals from Egypt, Syria and Palestine. The decision was a relief to some and disturbing to others.

Enas Al-Demardash, a 39-year-old geography teacher, told Kuwait Times that she has waited for this decision since they suspended schools. "Staying around your family is better than waiting here alone. It is great news and I cannot wait to travel back home," she said.

As for Amna Raed, 35, Arabic teacher, this decision was not the best one for her. "Suspending schools till August and giving us a vacation now

means that we have wasted our summertime," she added. "The tickets will be extra expensive like the ones that evacuated Egyptians last week; it cost KD 121 per person for a one-way ticket and I cannot afford to pay that kind of money for me and my children. Plus, imagine wasting your vacation in a curfew in Egypt instead of Kuwait. It is the same situation."

Adel El-Hakim, 41, math teacher, told Kuwait Times that the decision of getting home during this period is risky for his family. "My whole family are in Egypt, after the lockdown, I lost the hope of returning. At first, I was happy with the decision but when I think about it, do I really want to go to my children risking the chance of getting coronavirus in the airport or during any time of traveling? I stayed here to protect them and secure their lives," he explained.

Becoming infected with the coronavirus isn't Hakim's only concern, he is also worried about any new decisions that might prevent him from coming back. "Kuwait recently has issued a lot of decisions, day after day. What if they suspect that we got the virus from Egypt and ended all teachers' contracts? I'm risking not only my health but also my income."

EgyptAir has announced operating 14 flights starting March 24 to transport Egyptian teachers back home. Other airlines are expected to follow suit.

Municipality closed 55 shops in two governorates

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality deputy director for Capital and Jahra affairs Faisal Sadeq Al-Juma reviewed the efforts exerted by both governorates' field inspection teams of various facilities as part of precautionary measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19, noting that the teams had issued 1,445 warning notices, closed 55 shops and cafes, filed 144 citations, closed five amusement centers and cleaned and decontaminated 25,712 garbage containers.

In a detailed review, Juma explained that the Capital inspection teams had cleaned and decontaminated 21,500 garbage containers and three garbage collection trucks, issued 1,285 warning notices, closed 29 shops and cafes, filed 85 citations and closed three amusement centers. Juma added Jahra inspectors had cleaned and decontaminated 4,212 garbage containers and trucks, issued 160 warning notices, closed 26 shops and cafes, filed 59 citations and closed two amusement centers and 14 wedding halls.

Businesses that can open outside curfew

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality Director Ahmad Al-Manfouhi issued a decision on the activities to be allowed to operate between 5:00 am and 4:00 pm, outside of the curfew period taken as precautionary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The first article stipulates that all stores, shopping malls and supermarkets would be closed for customers and only use online shopping, with the exemption of the following:

- 1- Various types of foodstuff and supplies stores and markets.
- 2- Laundromats.
- 3- Various type of repair shops.
- 4- Automobile repair, maintenance and spare parts.
- 5- Money exchangers.
- 6- Pharmacies.
- 7- Various types of restaurants.
- 8- Optical shops.
- 9- Administrative offices.
- 10- Cooking gas branches.
- 11- Co-ops' family needs branches.
- 12- Feed shops.

The second article of the decision determined the industrial and craft activities, which are licensed by the Public Authority for Industry (PAI), allowed to open as follows:

- 1- Food.
- 2- Petrochemicals.
- 3- Gases.
- 4- Plastic.
- 5- Cardboard and paper.

Other activities will be allowed after obtaining PAI approval. The decision set the working hours for the activities in articles 1 and 2 from 5:00 am to 4:00 pm. The curfew starts from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am every day until further notice.

Rapid tests for coronavirus arrive in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Tests, used in rapid 'point-of-care' coronavirus (COVID-19) detection, arrived in Kuwait, making it the first country in the region to obtain such method, the Ministry of Health said Sunday. Assistant secretary at the Ministry of Health Dr Abdullah Al-Bader said that the tests, approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), had arrived in Kuwait in coordination with local and international drug companies. The tests, using molecular methods, will speed up the process of detecting coronavirus within 45 minutes, he affirmed. —KUNA

Legalese

Answers for small business owners



Attorney Fajer Ahmed

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As an employer, we have so many responsibilities right now. We are thinking of how to pay the rent, how to move our business forward, how to secure our employees' rights, how we can support the community and so on.

Most importantly we are thinking of how we can move forward and be sustainable in the long term. It is difficult to plan ahead for the long term when we cannot predict the near future. There is currently a shift in the economy, with so many businesses losing traction while others surprisingly are booming. I have received so many questions from business owners, and will be answering them this week.

Termination

Question: Can I terminate employees right now as my business is not doing well and I am not sure I can keep paying my staff?

Attorney Fajer: Please note that your employees also have obligations and responsibilities and families to feed, so reconsider this, unless you are in absolute distress, then if you are to terminate, terminate according to Kuwait Labor Law providing a three-month notice. It is important at this time, more than any other time, to follow Kuwait Labor law.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind if your employees are not coming into work:

1. Have them work from home utilizing many online services such as Zoom, Slack, Skype, etc.
2. Try to use the time of your employees to conduct research your business has always needed.
3. Think creatively of how else you can serve your clients, providing them with tips or creative ideas to do at home, while still delivering goods for orders received online.
4. Provide packages for online delivery, for example, if you operate a bookstore, you can do a box for the family, or if you operate an art supply store, provide a box with art supplies and instructions on activities.
5. Sell gift cards with flexible expiration dates, so that people can gift them in quarantine and you have a cash flow coming in.

Paying rent

Question: Do I have to pay my rent? I cannot pay the rent for this month as I was forced to shut down.

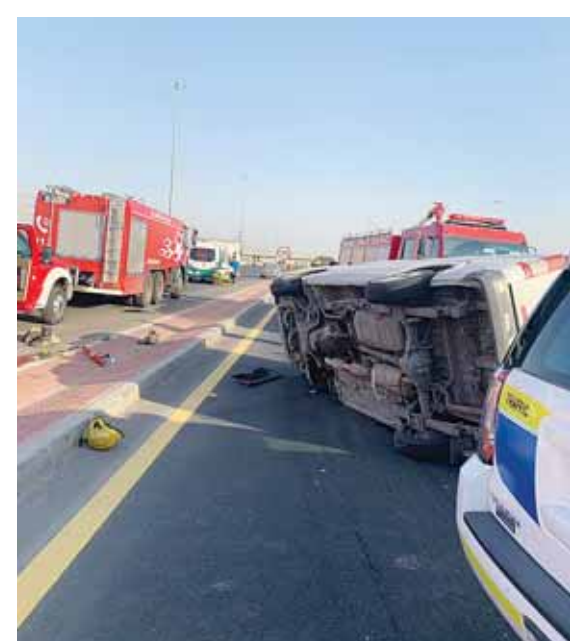
Attorney Fajer: Please discuss this with your landlord; so many landlords are being lenient and providing discounts or a grace period. If you cannot pay the rent, please let your landlord know in writing using a legal notice.

If you have further legal questions please forward them to info@ftl-legal.com

Three dead, seven injured in bus crash

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Three people died and seven were critically wounded after a bus flipped over on King Fahd Road yesterday. Mubarak Al-Kabeer firemen rushed to the scene in response to an emergency call and dealt with the accident. The injured were rushed to hospital while the bodies were taken to the coroner. An investigation was opened to determine the cause of the accident.



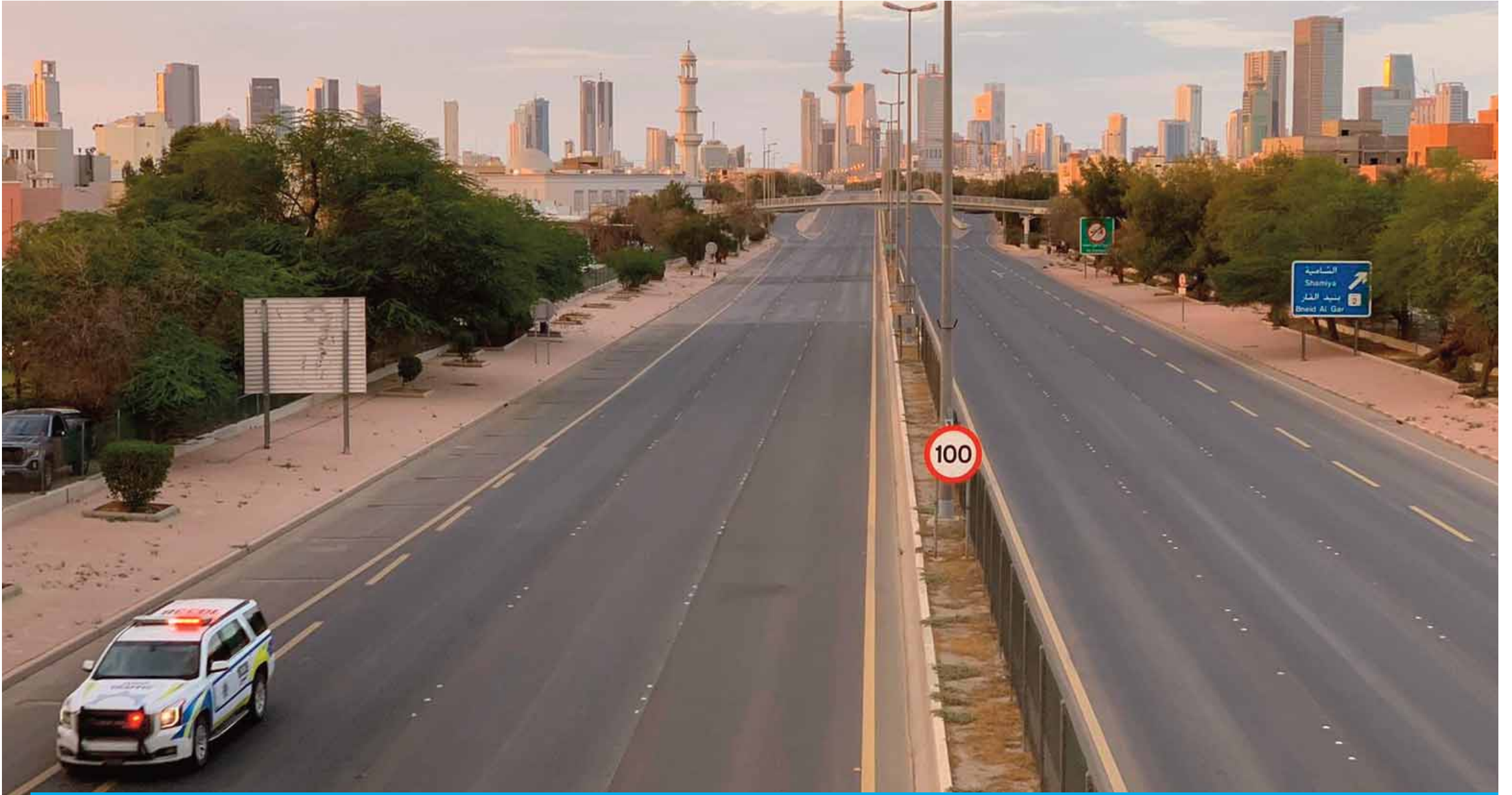
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Kuwait streets empty during curfew



KUWAIT: Streets and highways around Kuwait were deserted due to the state-wide partial curfew the government imposed as part of stringent measures against the spread of the coronavirus. The Cabinet declared on Saturday the imposition of a partial curfew from 5:00 pm to 4:00 am effective Sunday, as part of the wide scale efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh and KUNA





US Secretary of State visits Kabul amid multiple crises

Releasing inmates, screening staff: US jails limit virus risks



WUHAN: A volunteer operates a remote controlled disinfection robot to disinfect a residential area amid the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province. —AFP

Robot helps save lives on the frontline

'We can use robots to perform the most dangerous tasks'

SHANGHAI: Researchers at one of China's top universities have designed a robot they say could help save lives on the frontline during the coronavirus outbreak. The machine consists of a robotic arm on wheels that can perform ultrasounds, take mouth swabs and listen to sounds made by a patient's organs, usually done with a stethoscope.

Such tasks are normally carried out by doctors in person. But with this robot, which is fitted with cameras, medical personnel do not need to be in the same room as the patient, and could even be in a different city. "Doctors are all very brave," said Tsinghua University Professor Zheng Gangtie, the robot's chief designer.

"But this virus is just too contagious ... We can use robots to perform the most dangerous tasks." The idea came to Zheng around the turn of the Lunar New Year. Wuhan had just been put on lockdown and the number of cases and deaths was rising rapidly every day.

As an engineer, Zheng wanted to do something to contribute to the relief effort. On the first day of the Lunar New Year, he heard from his friend, Dong Jiahong, executive president at Beijing's Tsinghua Changgung Hospital, that the biggest problem was that of frontline workers getting infected. Gathering a team, Zheng set to work converting two mechanised robotic arms with the same technology used on space stations

and lunar explorers. The robots were almost entirely automated, and could even disinfect themselves after performing actions involving contact, Zheng said.

"But the feedback from doctors was that it would be better for there to be less automation, as a personal presence would comfort and calm the patient," he said. The team now has two robots, which have been trialled by doctors at hospitals in Beijing. One is still at the team's lab at the university, but the other is at the Wuhan Union Hospital, where doctors started training to use it on Thursday. If all goes to plan, the robot may be put to use on coronavirus patients in Wuhan from Sunday, Zheng said. It would be joined on its ward

rounds by a nurse or other member of staff.

Zheng would like to build more such robots but funding from the university has run out. The robots cost RMB 500,000 (\$72,000) a piece to make. He does not plan on commercializing his robot design but hopes a company comes along to take that on. China has sent tens of thousands of medical workers to the epicenter of the outbreak, Hubei province, state media say. More than 3,000 medical workers had been infected by late last month, including whistleblower Li Wenliang, whose death in early February sparked a brief and rare outpouring of grief and rage on Chinese social media. —Reuters

'We are at war': Spain seeks extended state of emergency

MADRID: The Spanish government sought to extend until April 11 a state of emergency that it has imposed to try to control Europe's second-worst outbreak of coronavirus while some regions on Sunday asked for harsher confinement measures to combat the pandemic. Spain's death toll jumped to over 1,700, with more than 28,000 cases of infection.

"We are at war," Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez told a news briefing, calling on Europe to launch a massive, coordinated public investment program like the post World War Two Marshall Plan. The nationwide state of emergency, announced on March 14 and intended to last 15 days, bars people from all but essential outings.

An extension would need to be approved by parliament but that is guaranteed after the main opposition party, the conservative

People's Party, said it would support it, giving enough votes to Sanchez's Socialist Party and its far-left government coalition partner Unidas Podemos. Sanchez said he hoped all parties would support the extension. It would be the first time in Spain's four-decade democracy that a state of emergency would be prolonged.

Parliament has a scheduled plenary session tomorrow. Sanchez praised Spaniards' commitment to home confinement, and defended the need to extend the state of emergency, saying, "We hope that with this so drastic, dramatic and hard measure ... we can bend the coronavirus' curve". The death toll from coronavirus rose to 1,720 on Sunday from 1,326 the day before, while the number of registered cases rose to 28,572 from 24,926, according to Health Ministry's data.

Of those, 54% are hospitalized and 12% are health staff, a figure officials described as worrisome given that they are at the frontline of the virus' response. Of the total number of cases, 2,575 people have been cured. Officials cautiously highlighted that the number of new daily registered cases had dropped by 26% from Saturday to Sunday. "The general trend towards stabilization can give some hope but we need to

be very cautious," said Fernando Simon, head of Spain's health emergency committee, at an earlier briefing.

The death rate from the illness is around 6% in Spain, said Simon, but he suggested the rate is actually lower because the number of cases of infection is in fact likely higher than those recorded. Authorities aim to have a more realistic picture in the coming days as they start distributing hundreds of thousands of fast testing devices. Priority for those tests will be given to the regions most hit by the pandemic, hospitals and health personnel, Simon added.

Regional criticism

Spain's 17 regions manage health care but, under the state of emergency, the government is centralizing all decisions, prompting some such as Madrid to suggest that the government is slowing down the arrival of equipment from abroad. Sanchez held on Sunday a video call with all the regional leaders but that did not prevent some regions, such as Catalonia and Murcia, from insisting later in demanding a total shutdown of all economic activity except essential services.

Murcia's government even issued an order in that regard, which was later



MADRID: Photo shows a general view of the temporary hospital set up at a pavilion in Ifema convention and exhibition center in Madrid. —AFP

rebuffed by Spain's Health Ministry, arguing it was the only authorized to take such a decision. The Spanish Armed Forces will expand its role in dealing with the outbreak

by moving patients to less overcrowded hospitals, transporting health equipment and helping Spaniards abroad return home, Sanchez said.—Reuters

Church coronavirus restrictions hit the African faithful

LAGOS: Nigerian police with megaphones struggled to keep the faithful in bustling Lagos away from church on Sunday, as worshippers in Africa faced tough restrictions aimed at halting the spread of coronavirus. "Go home, coronavirus is not a joke," a uniformed officer shouted at a crowd in the tightly-packed slum Makoko. Authorities in the city of around 20 million have limited religious gatherings to no more than 50 people - a minuscule number compared to the thousands who regularly pack out churches.

Tensions rose as worshippers clustered at the gate of Makoko's Celestial Church of Christ only to find policemen handing out fliers on the dangers of the virus blocking their way. "No-one told us that the churches

were closed," shouted Judith, a young woman dressed up in her best Sunday outfit of a sparkling dress. "We want to pray, coronavirus is not here - it is the whites who brought it to us." Florence Uche, a regular at the Methodist Church of the Trinity on Lagos island, said she would not miss the Sunday service for "anything in the world".

But she still had her temperature taken at the entrance and insisted she was not hugging her fellow worshippers any more. "God told me three days ago to spread the word that the spirit of coronavirus is dead. We will soon attend its funeral," she said, brandishing a bottle of hand sanitizer. Some 30 kilometers away in neighboring Ogun state, thousands of believers flocked to one of Nigeria's largest Pentecostal churches despite similar limitations from local authorities.

"Coronavirus cannot stop God's children, but I assure you that the solution will be found this week," Bishop David Oyedepo told those gathered at the Living Faith World Outreach Ministries. The roughly 10,000 people praying and singing was still far short of the 50,000 that the church can hold as worshippers

were told to gather in homes and local church branches to follow the service on television. "Our markets are open so there is no way to curb this but only God can save Africa from this pandemic," the bishop said.

'For our health'

From Kenya, to South Africa, to Nigeria, authorities across the continent have imposed draconian limits on their deeply religious populations to curb the rising number of confirmed infections. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation of some 190 million people, currently has 27 recorded cases, but testing has been limited. Most places of worship were closed in Kinshasa, the chaotic capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, for the first time in living memory.

"Since we were born we can't remember anything like this," Catholic priest Father Michel from the shuttered Notre Dame de Fatima said. "But it is for our own good, for our health." Services were broadcast over the internet and radio, and donations were made online after religious leaders told citizens to take the new virus as seriously as the Ebola epidemic that has ravaged the



LAGOS: The Apostolic Church headquarters is closed to worshippers in compliance with government directive on social gatherings at Ojota in Lagos yesterday. —AFP

country. "It is quite shocking as Sunday is the day dedicated to Jesus," said 16-year-old high school student Deborah. "But we understand that it is for our own security."—AFP

International

Domestic travel, airline hubs the latest hit as virus curbs tighten

United Arab Emirates to suspend flights for two weeks

SYDNEY: Airlines cancelled more flights yesterday, as Australia and New Zealand warned against non-essential domestic travel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) halted flights for two weeks and Singapore and Taiwan banned foreign transit passengers in the coronavirus battle. As demand evaporates, the number of scheduled flights last week was down more than 12% globally from the year earlier, flight data provider OAG said, with many airlines having announced further cuts to come.

"It is a war against a virus," Andrew Herdman, director general of the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines, told Reuters in a telephone interview. "What we have to do is take care of the institutions and people's livelihoods, the soft capital, so that we can restart effectively in a timely way when the time comes." Ratings agency Moody's estimated global capacity would fall by 25% to 35% this year, assuming the spread of the virus slowed by the end of June.

The UAE, home to major carriers Emirates and Etihad Airways, said it would suspend all passenger flights and airport transit for two weeks to help rein in the virus. The decision takes effect in 48 hours, it added, with cargo and emergency evacuation flights exempt. Emirates said on its website it would temporarily suspend all passenger services for two weeks starting March 25 due to the government directive. Singapore Airlines Ltd had been planning to halve its international capacity before the Asian city-state banned

entry or transit by short-term visitors on Sunday.

It stepped that up to a cut of 96% through at least the end of April, responding to what the carrier yesterday called the greatest challenge it has faced in its existence. "Without a domestic segment, the group's airlines become more vulnerable when international markets increasingly restrict the free movement of people or ban air travel altogether," it said, announcing plans to ground most of its fleet.

The airline normally relies heavily on connecting passengers from markets such as Australia to Europe and India to North America through its hub. Singapore Airlines would look to defer aircraft deliveries and has drawn on lines of credit to meet immediate cashflow requirements, it added. Taiwan announced similar curbs that will hit China Airlines Ltd and EVA Airways Corp, which have marketed

Taipei as a convenient and affordable transit airport, competing with Hong Kong and Singapore.

In Hong Kong, Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd has cut its passenger capacity by 96% in April and May as government curbs hit travel. Planemaker Airbus announced new steps to bolster its financial position, including the signing of a credit facility for 15 billion euros (\$16.1 billion). Airbus added it was withdrawing its 2020 financial guidance, dropping a proposed 2019 dividend that had a cash value of 1.4 billion euros and suspending funding to top up staff pension schemes.

In the southern hemisphere, Qantas Airways Ltd, Virgin Australia Holdings Ltd and Air New Zealand



DUSSELDORF: A file photo shows an Airbus A380 of the Emirates airline during landing at the airport in Duesseldorf, western Germany. Dubai carrier Emirates Airline announced yesterday, it will suspend all passenger flights from March 25 amid the novel coronavirus outbreak. — AFP

Ltd were re-examining domestic schedules after their governments advised against non-essential domestic travel. Regional Express Holdings Ltd (REX), which serves remote Australian towns, said it would shut all operations, except some subsidized routes, from April 6, unless governments quickly expressed a willingness to underwrite its losses.

Australia's largest airport operator, Sydney Airport Holdings Pty Ltd, wants to cut capital spending from a forecast A\$350 million to A\$450 million (\$200 to \$257 million), so as to focus only on critical projects, it said yesterday. In Hawaii, which ordered 14 days in quarantine for all arrivals from Thursday, Hawaiian Air-

lines said it would suspend most long-haul passenger services except for a daily flight from Honolulu to Los Angeles and a weekly flight to American Samoa.

In mainland China, the first to have been hit by the virus, domestic capacity has been rising as some internal curbs are eased, but there are concerns that passengers on international flights could re-import the virus. China's aviation regulator said all international flights due to arrive in the capital will be diverted to other airports in the country. More than 570,000 flights to, from and within, China alone were cancelled from Jan 1 to March 16, flight data provider Cirium says. — Reuters

Pandemic money: Where's it coming from, who pays?

PARIS: The mammoth bailout sums unleashed to combat the 2008 financial crisis fuelled populist backlashes in many countries as taxpayers were handed a whopping bill. This time feels different. Governments and central banks are all too aware that they face an unprecedented test from an invisible enemy that could kill their economies. The sums mobilized now—trillions in direct fiscal and monetary support, and loan guarantees—outstrip what was offered in 2008 to rescue banks from their own folly.

What's on offer?

All major economies are battling to halt the carnage on financial markets, intervening directly to save businesses and jobs, and indirectly via their central banks. "We are witnessing a panic movement in which markets, like businesses, are seeking liquidity at all costs, and selling anything that is sellable," said Agnes Benassy-Quere, professor at the Paris School of Economics. There is "no other way than to issue a lot of debt and to make sure that it will be bought by central banks", she said. While the virus appears contained in China, European countries and the United States are going all out with spending promises to limit the fallout of their own runaway outbreaks.

The biggest stimulus package comes from Washington where Senate Republicans on Thursday introduced a \$1 trillion plan in line with demands from President



HONG KONG: People wear face masks, as a precautionary measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, as they sit in an open area of the former Central Police Station, also known as Tai Kwun, in Hong Kong. — AFP

Donald Trump. Democrats are unconvinced by some of Trump's wish-list. But eschewing the traditional Republican aversion to debt and deficits, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell underscored that "this is no ordinary time". Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the government had "no problem issuing more debt" at super-low rates after recent interventions by the Federal Reserve.

What's the cost?

The Fed and others including the European Central Bank are engaged in shock-and-awe tactics to reassure the markets and ensure plenty of money is on hand for businesses. Their actions, slashing interest rates or engaging in outright purchase of government debt ("quantitative easing") finally brought some calm to markets on Friday.

One benefit for governments—at least

richer ones with access to deep capital markets—is that they can issue long-term bonds now at fixed rates at next-to-no cost. "The only issue is in 10-20 years when you have to refinance the debt," said Charlie Robertson, global chief economist at Renaissance Capital in London. "No one foots the bill because borrowing costs are close to zero—it's magic money," he said, adding there is no risk of inflation given the scale of the shock.

The situation is a lot more alarming for developing economies that lack both access to cheap borrowing and advanced medical systems. "If South Africa can't afford to control the virus, it will spread again. No country can afford to keep every other country banned from travelling," Robertson told AFP. "So I would argue there has to be a global financing solution to address this virus crisis," he said, urging action from the G7 and G20 nations. — AFP

Facebook Messenger in virus battle

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook yesterday began enlisting outside developers to create ways its Messenger service can help health organizations battling the novel coronavirus. The social network also invited software savants to take part in an online "hackathon" aimed at creating ways to use Messenger to ease social-distancing and deliver accurate information about the pandemic, according to Messenger vice president Stan Chudnovsky in a blog post.

He unveiled a global program intended to connect government health organizations and UN agencies with developers who can create ways to use Messenger share accurate information and speed up responses to people's questions. Software makers, for example, could help agencies automate answering common questions, to allow staff to tackle more challenging tasks. Developers can also help organizations use software to quickly distribute updated information.

UNICEF and Pakistan's Ministry of National Health already use Messen-

ger to keep people posted about COVID-19, according to the Facebook-owned messaging platform. Facebook-owned messaging service WhatsApp recently launched a free World Health Organization alert designed to answer questions about the coronavirus and debunk "coronavirus myths." The service, launching in English, is to expand in coming weeks to include Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish.

WhatsApp last week launched a Coronavirus Information Hub in partnership with WHO and United Nations organizations. WhatsApp, which claims more than a billion users, issued a \$1 million grant to an International Fact Checking Network alliance devoted to reporting on coronavirus rumors spreading on messaging services. "We think the most important step WhatsApp can take is to help connect people directly with public health officials providing crucial updates about coronavirus," spokesman Carl Woog told AFP.

Concerns have been raised about WhatsApp and other messaging services being used to spread bogus information about coronavirus. WhatsApp software prevents users from blasting messages to massive numbers of people at once, which tends to be a spam tactic. The service also labels forwarded or chain messages to show people they did not come directly from a friend or family member. — AFP

Nursing homes a vector for deadly virus

MADRID: Death arrived slowly at the nursing home where Chelo Megia works. Then it was everywhere. On March 11, a Wednesday, Megia still thought the Residencia Nunez De Balboa in central Spain, where she had been an auxiliary nurse for 15 years, might avoid the new virus spreading rapidly across the country. "We saw it as far away," she said.

By Thursday, several elderly residents had been hospitalized. The staff learned later that some residents had tested positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. On Friday a medical team arrived in head-to-toe hazmat gear that Megia had only ever seen in movies. "They started isolating everybody and telling us, 'Protect yourselves.' We were wearing a mask and gloves and that was it," she said.

That day, the regional government replaced the management of Megia's home, which it had been running as part of social services, with medical staff, and transferred it to its health department in a bid to tackle the outbreak. Just one week later, according to unions and officials, 10 of the home's 200 or so residents are dead, 13 have tested positive for coronavirus and 50 more are possibly infected in a country with one of the biggest outbreaks after China and Italy. Not all have been tested. A patient

ombudsman's group has filed a complaint of negligence against the home with Spanish authorities; the home's owner, the regional government, declined to comment on it. Worldwide, nursing homes have become hotspots for the disease. As it courses through Spain, the death toll has more than doubled in the past week to 1,720 people, says Spain's health emergencies department. So far at least 100 of those have reportedly been from nursing homes, but the central government can't say how many. "Right now, this isn't a nursing home, it's a hospital," said Megia, 49, exhausted and shaken after seven straight days on the job. "Everything has completely changed."

The coronavirus has wrought dramatic transformations of nursing homes across Spain, turning dozens of its 5,500 homes into plague houses and propelling their ill-equipped staff onto the frontlines of an accelerating pandemic. Spain's overwhelmed hospitals have asked homes for the elderly like Megia's to care for seriously ill residents, but the homes lack ventilators and must compete with hospitals for scarce medical equipment and virus testing kits, industry representatives say.

Many face dwindling supplies of face masks, gloves and gowns, according to staff, union leaders, care home operators and industry groups interviewed by Reuters. In some homes, staff said they were rationing masks or making their own out of cloth, or wearing disposable gowns for multiple shifts. Some workers said they were too scared to come to work, while others had fallen sick, leaving homes short-staffed during a time of unprecedented need. — Reuters

First French doctor dies as virus death toll rockets

PARIS: The first French doctor battling the coronavirus has died as the death toll in the country spiralled to 674 Sunday. With the outbreak spreading to eight regions - and 112 more dying in a single day - authorities admitted their count does not include those who died at home and in old people's homes. "We are looking at an epidemic that is widening and escalating," the head of the health service Jerome Salomon said. With hospitals flooded with 7,240 victims, the military are having to transfer some from the worst-hit areas.

"The virus kills and it is continuing to kill," Salomon added. The 67-year-old emergency room medic who died worked at Compiègne hospital, north of Paris, the town's mayor said. He was hailed as a hero by his family for coming back from holiday to treat the first major outbreak in the country. Mayor Philippe Marini said that Madagascar-born Jean-Jacques Razafindranazy "came back to work voluntarily to treat people and knew he was taking a risk".



PARIS: A homeless person sits at a bus stop in Paris, as a strict lockdown comes into effect to stop spread of the COVID-19 caused by novel coronavirus in the country prohibiting all but essential outings in a bid to curb coronavirus spread. — AFP

Calls for curfew

His wife, a family doctor, is now also sick with the virus and has been quarantined at home. Dr Razafindranazy's death came as controversy raged over a shortage of protective gear for medical staff in some parts of France. Despite Health Minister Olivier Veran saying more than 250 million masks had been ordered, some doctors and nurses have complained that they have had to do without. The French government is also under pressure from doctors' unions to impose a total nationwide curfew.

The northeast city of Mulhouse, where French soldiers have already set up a military field hospital to help hospital staff over-

whelmed by the number of cases, declared its own curfew from Sunday night from 9:00 pm to 6:00 am. Some other cities, including Nice and Perpignan, have already imposed their own curfews. With authorities expected to extend the lockdown beyond the end of March, doctors want it tightened to "at a minimum" stopping people going out to jog or exercise. Parliament toughened fines for people who break the current confinement measures late Saturday. Repeat offenders now face six months in prison and a fine of 3,700 euros (\$3,950). And on Sunday it declared a health emergency in the country, granting greater powers to the government to fight the pandemic. — AFP

International

US Secretary of State visits Kabul amid multiple crises

A raging Taliban insurgency and rising coronavirus cases

KABUL: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in the Afghan capital yesterday amid an ongoing political crisis, a raging Taliban insurgency and rising coronavirus cases - all of which further threaten an already-floundering peace process. Pompeo was set to meet with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani along with his archrival Abdullah Abdullah, who also claims the presidency, following a contested election last year.

According to a pool report from a journalist accompanying Pompeo, the top US diplomat was welcomed by special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad - the lead US negotiator in recent talks with the Taliban - after arriving at Kabul airport. The visit comes just a day after the Afghan government and the Taliban held their first discussion on arranging prisoner exchanges - a key step in a broader push for peace following a withdrawal deal signed between Washington and the militants last month.

The agreement established a framework for bringing to an end America's longest war following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Khalilzad tweeted Sunday it was "urgent" to quickly conclude plans for the prisoner swap - as called for in the US pact with the Taliban - with the coronavirus pandemic complicating diplomatic contacts.

The deal called for the release of up to 5,000 Taliban fighters held by Kabul, and up to 1,000 members of the Afghan government forces in insurgent hands. That was meant to take place before the start of peace talks originally set for March 10 between the government - which was not a party to the negotiations that produced the Doha deal - and the Taliban. After ini-

tially refusing to release the Taliban prisoners, Ghani announced that the authorities would free 1,500 insurgents as a "gesture of goodwill" with plans to free another 3,500 prisoners after the talks are underway.

The Taliban rejected the offer. The Doha accord also calls for the gradual withdrawal of American and other foreign troops over a 14-month period - the main focus of the US diplomatic efforts. The first phase of that withdrawal has already begun, though some troop movements have been slowed by the coronavirus pandemic. In exchange, the Taliban committed to fight jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and promised to

negotiate for the first time with Kabul. But since the Doha agreement was signed, the Taliban have carried out scores of attacks.

Political chaos in Kabul has further complicated matters, with Ghani's former chief executive Abdullah also claiming the presidency following last September's bitterly disputed election. The impasse and continued fighting along with the world's preoccupation with coronavirus has sparked fears the window for a peace deal is closing fast. Afghan health officials have reported just 40 cases of the novel coronavirus and one death to date. However health experts fear the contagion is spreading as tens of thousands of Afghans have returned home in recent weeks after fleeing virus-hit Iran.

An insider attack

Meanwhile, at least two dozen Afghan security forces were killed in an insider attack on their base in southern Afghanistan, officials said, as fighting raged in the war-weary country while efforts to start talks with the Taliban stalled. The pre-dawn



KABUL: A volunteer wearing a hazmat suit and a mask sprays disinfectant on a bus during a preventive campaign against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus in Kabul. — AFP

attack in Zabol province comes as Afghanistan is grappling with several crises including an increase in Taliban violence that has thrown a supposed peace process into turmoil, mounting coronavirus cases, and a political feud that has seen two men claim the presidency.

The attack in Zabol saw several "infiltrators" open fire on their comrades as they slept, according to provincial governor Rahmatullah Yarmal, in one of the deadliest attacks since the US signed a withdrawal deal with the Taliban last month. The pre-dawn raid targeted a joint police and army headquarters near Qalat, the provincial capital. "In the attack, 14 Afghan army forces and 10 policemen were killed," Zabol

provincial council chief Ata Jan Haq Bayan said. He added that four other Afghan service members were missing. "The attackers had connections with the Taliban insurgents," Bayan said.

They fled in two military Humvee vehicles, along with a pickup truck, weapons and ammunition. Yarmal confirmed the toll to AFP. Hours after the incident the defense ministry vowed to retaliate, while also giving a lower death toll for the attack, saying just 17 were killed. The Afghan security forces "will not leave this attack unanswered and will avenge the blood of the martyrs" the ministry added in a statement. The ministry has been known to downplay the size of attacks and losses. — Agencies



At least 24 Afghan forces killed in insider attack

continued fighting along with the world's preoccupation with coronavirus has sparked fears the window for a peace deal is closing fast. Afghan health officials have reported just 40 cases of the novel coronavirus and one death to date. However health experts fear the contagion is spreading as tens of thousands of Afghans have returned home in recent weeks after fleeing virus-hit Iran.

For immigrant, virus adds to constant fear of life

LOS ANGELES: James can't afford to quarantine: he lost his job as a waiter in a Los Angeles restaurant and is two weeks away from running out of money for rent and food. But as an undocumented immigrant, the 30-year-old Colombian cannot turn to the social aid programs being offered by the US government to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. James is not his real name. It is the name on his fake social security card that, like many in his precarious position, he uses to get low-paying, hourly jobs.

He usually gets by on around \$400 a week. "I have to find a way to at least cover rent and food, and with this situation, getting a job is complicated," he said. Life as an undocumented immigrant is always anxiety-inducing, especially since Donald Trump became president having campaigned on a promise to crack down on illegal immigration. Now there is the extra pressure of the pandemic, which has killed 417 people in the US out of more than 33,000 confirmed cases.

Releasing inmates: US jails limit risks

NEW YORK: The coronavirus is invading US jails and prisons, prompting inmate releases, reduced bail requirements and other extraordinary measures as officials rush to avert a potentially disastrous spread of the virus among crowded inmate populations. In New York City, where at least 29 inmates and 17 staff in the jail system have been infected by the coronavirus, Mayor Bill de Blasio said on Sunday 23 inmates would be released before day's end and the city would decide within 24 hours whether to release up to 200 more.

He said inmates would be screened to identify those at risk from the virus, which has killed more than 14,000 people across the globe, including 415 in the United States. Officials were still determining how many inmates ultimately should be let out of the city's 11 jails, who will be eligible and how they will be supervised. "It's very thorny," de Blasio told a news conference. City residents need to "have relative comfort" that people who are released are unlikely to commit a "serious crime," he added.

New York City's Board of Correc-

'Health first'

Luz Gallegos, from the TODEC non-profit which provides legal help to immigrants, held a workshop last weekend in a rural community north of Los Angeles. Questions included: can I go to the hospital without insurance? Am I in danger of being deported? If I use government services for coronavirus, will it hurt me later applying for residency? "COVID-19 is an additional stress for the community," Gallegos said. "It's a community that doesn't trust the government." TODEC's message is "health first" - but that does not erase the issue.

Many immigrants' chief concern is the new "public charge" rule, which allows health issues to be considered when granting visas or permanent residency. US immigration officials insist medical tests to detect coronavirus or receive treatment for the disease will not be penalized. Immigration and Customs Enforcement also announced it will temporarily stop arrests and deportations of undocumented immigrants during the crisis. But uncertainty over the law means fear persists, especially as "the Trump administration keeps on changing" its policies on handling immigrants, said Gallegos.

The US has pledged \$100 billion in social aid for workers directly hit by the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. This includes paid leave for employees who fall ill, and easier access to unemployment benefits and food stamps for those who lose their jobs. — AFP

tions, an independent oversight body, has called on the mayor to release around 2,000 inmates who were severely sick, held on low-level offenses or jailed for parole violations. "It's the right number to make it work," board member Dr Robert Cohen said. New York City's jail system is among relatively few that have announced confirmed cases of the coronavirus among inmates or staff. But other jails nationwide are moving to reduce inmate populations before it arrives.

In Oklahoma City, the Oklahoma County Jail is working with judges and district attorneys to secure court orders for the release of inmates held on minor misdemeanors and considered minimal security risks. Though the jail has no confirmed coronavirus cases among its 1,500 inmates, the goal is "to get out as many people as possible, keeping in mind the safety of the public," said spokesman Mark Myers.

Jails typically hold people for relatively short periods as they await trial and have more flexibility to reduce populations than state or federal prisons, whose inmates have been convicted and sentenced. While many state prisons have announced steps to limit the spread of the virus such as banning visitors, they generally require a court order to release inmates. Federal prisons face similar restrictions, although President Donald Trump said on Sunday that he would consider an executive order to release "totally nonviolent prisoners" from those facilities. — Reuters

New Slovak govt takes office amid virus fight

BRATISLAVA: Prime Minister Igor Matovic and his team were sworn in at a ceremony with participants wearing facial masks as a precaution against coronavirus. Slovakia's newly appointed members of the government wearing protective face masks pose for a group photo at Presidential Palace in Bratislava, Slovakia, March 21, 2020.

Slovak President Zuzana Caputova appointed a new centre-right coalition led by Prime Minister Igor Matovic on Saturday, after a February election swept anti-graft parties to power. Matovic and his team were sworn in at a ceremony with participants wearing facial masks as a precaution against coronavirus.

The government handover comes as the central European country of 5.5 million people battles the coronavirus outbreak that has put Europe on lockdown, pressuring Matovic's four-party coalition to agree a cabinet quickly. The government replaced a centre-left Smer party-led administration that has ruled the country through a period of economic growth since 2012, and for 12 of



BRATISLAVA: Newly appointed Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovic (center-left), leader of the OLANO anti-graft party and President Zuzana Caputova (center-right) pose for a family picture with Ministers after a swearing in ceremony of the new four-party coalition government on March 21, 2020 outside of the Presidential palace in Bratislava. — AFP

the last 14 years.

Smer's popularity has slipped since the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée led to massive street protests against alleged corruption that are still reverberating. "Bearing in mind our responsibility and the burden we received, that is the coronavirus pandemic, we have signed a deal so that we could make good on our promise to make Slovakia a country that all honest people could be proud of," Matovic

said after the parties signed their coalition deal. Matovic, 46, and his OLANO party, known for publicity stunts to shine a light on alleged graft, won a quarter of the vote in the Feb 29 election. OLANO will lead with three other parties: Sme Rodina (We are Family), a socially conservative and eurosceptic party; SaS (Freedom and Solidarity), an economically liberal party; and Za Ludi (For the People), a mildly conservative party led by former president Andrej Kiska.

Prison riot kills 23 in Colombia

MONTEVIDEO: Panic over the spread of the coronavirus sparked a prison riot in Colombia that killed 23 inmates on Sunday, as Chile became the latest Latin American country to announce restrictions on movement. Rioting swept through the crowded jail overnight in the Colombian capital Bogota amid rising tensions over the virus in the penitentiary system.

Justice Minister Margarita Cabello described the violence as an attempted mass breakout, part of what she said was a coordinated plan with inmates who caused disturbances in 13 jails across the country. The minister rejected accusations by rights groups that the riots were sparked by unsanitary conditions inside a prison system that was woefully unprepared to face the pandemic.

A curfew in Chile "will take effect throughout the national territory from 10:00 pm to 05:00 am the next day," Health Minister Jaime Manalich announced Sunday. The country, which has 632 infections, registered its first death from the pandemic at the weekend. Ecuador, which has seen the region's second-greatest number of deaths after Brazil, marked its highest daily increase on Sunday, doubling to 14 dead and 789 positive cases. Quito on Sunday ordered the military to take control of the worst-hit province of Guayas in the south-west of the country.

Government Minister Maria Paula Romo said the armed forces had been authorized "to manage the province of Guayas as a national security zone". A nationwide curfew has been in place since Tuesday. Governments in the region have been stepping up



BOGOTA: Inmates extend their hands at the Modelo prison in Bogota after a riot yesterday. — AFP

efforts to try to slow the spread of the pandemic, which has claimed 13,500 lives worldwide. Argentina, Bolivia, El Salvador and Paraguay are among a growing number of countries to impose a total lockdown of their populations. Colombia will join the group from midnight today with a 19-day mandatory lockdown of its 48 million population.

Ignoring lockdown

Bolivia's government criticized sections of the population for ignoring its lockdown on Sunday. "We are not going to do this with a 98 percent lockdown. We are only going to defeat the coronavirus with 100 percent commitment," Defense Minister Luis Fernando Lopez said. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on Sunday announced that the country would pay the salaries of employees at small and medium companies affected by the quarantine. The socialist leader said the measure would begin "in the month

of March" but did specify where the funds for his plan would come from.

Unlike other regional leaders, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has played down the crisis, though the pandemic has left 25 dead in his country, with 1,546 confirmed cases. State governors have taken matters into their own hands, with Sao Paulo's Joao Doria ordering a 15-day quarantine that requires a "total closure of non-essential businesses and services" and Rio's governor closing the city's iconic beaches. On Sunday, Brazil's development bank (BNDES) announced it would inject 55 billion reais (\$11 billion) into the economy to counteract the impact of the coronavirus. The funds will be used to protect more than two million jobs and to finance the suspension of interest payments and direct and indirect loans of Brazilian companies with BNDES for six months, as well as to increase the supply of credit for small and medium businesses. — AFP

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Business

10 Trillion-dollar economic rescue package crashes in US Senate**11** Central banks deploy record sums to support markets, but may need more**11** Dollar rises but doubts about stimulus vote narrow gains

MELBOURNE: A Centrelink worker (center) speaks to some of the hundreds of people queued outside an Australian government welfare center, Centrelink, in Melbourne yesterday as jobless Australians flooded unemployment offices around the country after Prime Minister Scott Morrison warned the coronavirus pandemic would cause an economic crisis akin to the Great Depression.— AFP

Australians revive Great Depression memories

Morrison warns coronavirus pandemic could cause economic havoc

SYDNEY: Jobless Australians flooded unemployment offices around the country yesterday as Prime Minister Scott Morrison warned the coronavirus pandemic would cause an economic crisis akin to the Great Depression. After a record 29 years of economic growth, Australia is poised to spiral into recession as the global coronavirus outbreak wreaks havoc on the country's economy despite a Aus\$189 billion (\$109 billion) government relief package.

In scenes not seen in Australia for decades, queues stretched around the block at unemployment offices around the country as the forced closure of pubs, casinos, churches and gyms began at midday yesterday. An online portal for government

services also crashed as jobseekers rushed to register for income support payments, which have been temporarily doubled by Aus\$550 a fortnight to help people cope with the coronavirus crisis.

With hundreds of thousands of jobs on the line, Morrison told his compatriots they faced an economic crisis "the likes of which we have not seen since the Great Depression", referring to the global financial meltdown in the late 1920s and 1930s. "They are lining up at Centrelink offices as we speak—something unimaginable at this scale, only weeks ago," he told Parliament.

"They have lost their jobs, many, and we know many more will. This is the biggest economic shock our nation has faced in generations." Services Aus-

tralia, which operates the social welfare offices known as Centrelink, urged people not to visit physical locations unless there was a "critical need" to do so.

After a key government website crashed, minister Stuart Robert initially claimed a demand surge had been worsened by hackers attempting a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack.

He later told Parliament the DDoS alarm had in fact been set off by almost 100,000 people trying to access the site at once. Ahead of closing non-essential services, Australia had already shut its borders to international arrivals, while some interstate borders have been effectively shuttered and all non-essential travel is banned. Morrison has warned the

measures would remain in place across the country for up to six months, with stricter rules looming in an effort to contain the spread of coronavirus. He said the once in a 100 years event meant that 2020 would be "the toughest year of our lives". Australia's benchmark ASX 200 has lost 38 percent on coronavirus fears since its peak in mid-February, falling on Monday to lows not seen since November 2012.

Seven people have died from the disease in Australia, which has a death rate of just 0.44 percent compared to over four percent in countries like the United States, Britain and France. The nation has recorded more than 1,600 cases of COVID-19, with infection rates accelerating in the most populous states. — AFP

Airbus cancels 2019 dividend, 2020 forecasts

PARIS: European aviation giant Airbus said yesterday it would cancel the planned dividend payment for 2019 and also abandon its earnings forecasts for the current year because of the economic uncertainty sparked by the coronavirus pandemic. "We have withdrawn our 2020 guidance due to the volatility of the situation," Airbus chief executive Guillaume Faury said in a statement.

And as part of measures to bolster the group's liquidity and balance sheet in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Airbus would also "withdraw the 2019 dividend proposal of 1.80 euros per share with an overall cash value of approximately 1.4 billion euros" (\$1.5 billion), the statement said. "Our first priority is protecting people while supporting efforts globally to curb the spread of the coronavirus," Faury said. "We are also safeguarding our business to protect the future of Airbus and to ensure we can return to efficient operations once the situation recovers."

Faury said he was convinced that Airbus and the broader aerospace sector will overcome this critical period.



This file photograph shows a logo at the Airbus A380 assembly site in Blagnac, southern France. — AFP

To ensure Airbus's financial flexibility, the board of directors had agreed to secure a new credit facility amounting to 15 billion euros in addition to the existing 3.0-billion-euro revolving credit facility, the statement continued.

With these decisions, Airbus would have "significant liquidity available to cope with additional cash requirements related to the coronavirus. Available liquidity now amounts to approximately 30 billion euros."

Airbus said the measures were intended to "secure business continuity

for itself even in a protracted crisis." Airbus is scheduled to hold its annual shareholders meeting in Amsterdam on April 16, but was discouraging physical attendance due to the coronavirus pandemic. The group had already announced on Sunday that it planned to partially resume production and assembly work at its plants in France and Spain following four days of health and security checks. In 2019, Airbus, which employs a global workforce of 135,000, generated revenues of around 70 billion euros. — AFP

Oil prices remain volatile as virus saps demand

SINGAPORE: Oil prices were mixed in volatile Asian trade yesterday but remained at multi-year lows due to the double shock of the coronavirus pandemic and the Saudi-Russia price war.

Both main contracts plummeted at the open after a trillion-dollar support package for the American economy crashed to defeat, and virus deaths surged in Europe and the US over the weekend. International benchmark Brent crude was off 2.3 percent in afternoon trade at \$26 a barrel, after earlier being down about five percent.

US benchmark West Texas Intermediate however was up 1.3 percent at nearly \$23 a barrel as traders bought at bargain prices—after having fallen over three percent in earlier deals. Both contracts remain at multi-year lows as lockdowns and travel restrictions to fight the virus hit demand, and top producers Saudi Arabia and Russia engage in a price war. Coronavirus deaths soared across Europe and the United States at the weekend despite heightened restrictions, with the tally jumping to more than 14,700, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker. Prices also fell after a trillion-dollar Senate proposal to rescue the US economy was defeated because of zero support from Democrats, and with five Republicans absent from the cham-

ber because of virus-related quarantines.

The bill had proposed funding for American families, thousands of shuttered or suffering businesses and the nation's critically under-equipped hospitals. Oil markets began plunging earlier this month after top exporter Saudi Arabia launched unilateral price cuts following a failure to secure an agreement with Russia to further reduce output and support prices. There were hopes for some action to support the market after an envoy from Texas, a top oil-producing US state, was given a rare invite to an OPEC meeting in June.

But hopes for an agreement fizzled after he faced criticism for suggesting output curbs. Even if cuts are agreed at some point, they "alone will not be enough to see prices fully recover the lost ground over the last month", said Peter Kiernan, energy analyst from the Economist Intelligence Unit. "This would need a noticeable recovery in demand, which is unlikely in the short to medium term."

Meanwhile, Oil producer Algeria decided to reduce its public spending in the wake of a coronavirus-induced collapse in hydrocarbon prices that has destroyed revenue projections for the current year.

At the end of a cabinet meeting chaired by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the presidency announced the state's operating budget would be slashed by 30 percent, without specifying the new level of spending. The 2020 budget had been based on an oil price of \$60 per barrel, but prices dipped to \$22.50 at one stage last week, due to the impact of the deadly new coronavirus on global demand and a price war among major oil producers. — AFP

Business

Trillion-dollar economic rescue package crashes in US Senate

Proposal receives zero support from Democrats

WASHINGTON: A trillion-dollar Senate proposal to rescue the reeling US economy crashed to defeat Sunday after receiving zero support from Democrats, and with five Republicans absent from the chamber because of virus-related quarantines.

Democrats said the Republican plan failed to sufficiently protect millions of American workers or shore up the critically under-equipped health care system during the coronavirus crisis. The bill proposed an estimated \$1.7 trillion or more in funding to cushion the blow for American families and thousands of shuttered or suffering businesses.

Despite intense negotiations between Republicans, Democrats and President Donald Trump's administration, the roll call was 47-47, far short of the 60 votes needed to advance. Five Republican senators are in self-quarantine and did not vote, including Senator Rand Paul, who announced Sunday he had tested positive for the COVID-19 illness.

Even as infighting derailed the plan, lawmakers carried on with closed-door negotiations deep into Sunday hoping to get the package back on track. Top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin "are working late into the night, and they just had another productive meeting," a Schumer spokesman said.

The shock Senate result heaps major pressure on Congress to overcome divisions and swiftly greenlight a federal government intervention-likely the largest of its kind in US history.

The futures on the main US stock exchange indicators were dropping around four percent or more, indicating that Wall Street could open sharply lower. Hong Kong stocks plunged five percent upon opening. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell blasted the Democratic opposition and warned of economic devastation ahead if Congress

does not act promptly.

"The notion that we have time to play games here with the American economy and the American people is utterly absurd," he fumed. "We need to signal to the public that we're ready to get this thing done."

He said he wanted lawmakers to recognize "the need to act before the markets go down further and the American people become even more depressed about our lack of ability to come together under the most extraordinary circumstances."

'Not' there yet

Schumer insisted the bill falls well short of sufficiently protecting US employees, millions of whom are at risk of losing their jobs as the economy grinds to a halt, while offering a "large corporate bailout with no protections for workers and virtually no oversight." He accused Republicans of trying to "skimp on funding" to address shortfalls for hospitals, equipment, medical personnel and other health care infrastructure. Mnuchin, Trump's key representative in the negotiation, had expressed hope an agreement could be reached Sunday.

Speaking on Fox News earlier Sunday, he detailed a separate massive relief plan by US financial authorities that "will have up to \$4 trillion of liquidity that we can use to support the economy." Together, the urgent measures represented one of the most dramatic governmental rescue efforts outside wartime, with millions of people thrown out of work, thousands of businesses shuttered, travel severely curtailed and no certainty as to when things might improve. The measures also came as the death toll and contagion confirmations continued to rise—especially in hotspots like New York—and several states including California, New York and Illinois effectively went into lockdown in a bid to halt the virus's spread. "The worst is yet to



The Capitol Building in Washington, DC. —AFP

come," New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said on CNN, predicting hospitals in the city would face serious shortages of protective equipment within days unless drastic action is taken.

"We expect April will be a lot worse than March, and I fear May could be worse than April," he said.

Mnuchin said the congressional rescue would give small businesses enough cash to pay laid-off workers for two weeks, provide direct cash payments to Americans—about \$3,000 for a family of four, he said—and enhance unemployment insurance for those laid off. Democrats have demanded

stronger worker protections. Schumer has said he wants the government to pay full wages for four months to workers laid off due to the crisis.

Trump sounded a note of optimism, even as the Senate bill stalled. "I think that the Democrats want to get there, and... the Republicans want to get there," he said. The president also said the administration was "considering" the prospect of US lawmakers being allowed to vote remotely, a dramatic departure from current House and Senate rules that mandate all votes be conducted in person. —AFP

Global economy hit by severest shock since 1930s

LONDON: Recessions often start with a small drop in activity which then progressively deepens over subsequent months as the second and higher-round effects on the economy start to occur.

But the current business cycle downturn looks very different. In terms of its scale and sudden onset, there is no parallel since the end of the Second World War. The initial shock from the coronavirus outbreak and the shut-down of much of the transportation and business system is both large and sudden.

There are no government statistics yet on the scale of the current downturn, but taking the oil industry as a proxy for economic demand, consumption appears to have fallen by around 10 million barrels per day, or 10 percent, within the space of a single month. The first-round shock to the system is enormous even before any second and third-round impact on business and consumer spending. In 1945, demobilization and the conversion from wartime to peacetime production caused industrial output to drop by 30-35 percent progressively over 12 months.

In the 1974/75 recession, US industrial output fell by around 15 percent over roughly 20 months, according to data from the Federal Reserve.

In 2008/09, US industrial output declined by almost 20 percent from its pre-recession peak, but the decline was stretched over a period of roughly 18 months. All these magnitudes and durations are approximate because peaks and troughs in industrial production do not correspond precisely with the official business cycle dates, which take into account other factors as well.

But the current downturn could easily prove the steepest since 1945. In scale and sudden onset, it looks more like the dynamics of the 1930s Depression or the violent business busts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Initial shock

Recessions can be a lot like epidemics in that a small initial disturbance—the infection of a single patient or failure of a single business/sector—grows exponentially as it is transmitted through the rest of the system. In recent years, economists have drawn on research from epidemiology to understand how a single bank or business failure can set off a cascading failure as it spreads across the economy.

The initial infection or business failure may be relatively inconsequential; it is the network of connections by which it is transmitted across the population or the economy that turns an isolated problem into a pandemic or recession. In the case of the economy, recessions are transmitted through real changes in the flow of spending and income, namely sales, orders, employment, wages and debt payments. But transmission can be accelerated by changes in the stories individuals and businesses construct about the immediate future and the impact on their decision-making. — Reuters

SoftBank to sell up to \$41bn in assets to buy shares, cut debt

TOKYO: SoftBank Group said yesterday it would sell up to \$41 billion in assets to finance a stock buyback, reduce debts and increase its cash reserves after weeks of heavy losses in its shares.

The firm said it would buy back \$18 billion of its stock, with the remaining money to be used on paying down debt, bond buybacks and cash reserves, setting a timetable of a year to complete the transactions. News of the massive buyback sent SoftBank stock limit-up, soaring 18.61 percent to 3,187 yen in the last hour of trade in Tokyo.

"This program will be the largest share buyback and will result in the largest increase in cash balance in the history of SBG, reflecting the firm and unwavering confidence we have in our business," chairman Masayoshi Son said in a statement. "This will allow us to strengthen our balance sheet while significantly reducing debt," he added, saying the assets being sold account

for "less than 20 percent of the company's current asset value".

The firm believes its shares are currently "substantially undervalued" and that the buyback would "further strengthen its balance sheet and enhance its credit rating." SoftBank has seen its stock sink in recent weeks on worries about the liquidity of the heavily indebted company, as global financial markets are roiled by fears about the economic consequences of the pandemic. It had already announced a massive share buyback that prompted S&P Global Ratings to cut the firm's outlook to negative, a move some analysts said misinterpreted the company's health.

Some said yesterday's move should also be viewed positively.

"It's not a bad strategy to use their cash for buying back shares when the outlook of the market and the economy is very uncertain," Yoshihiro Okumura, general manager at Chibagin Asset Management, told AFP. "The market



TOKYO: SoftBank Group CEO Masayoshi Son said the massive buyback will help strengthen the firm's balance sheet and reduce debt — AFP

took the surprise announcement positively at a time when it's hard to find good investment destinations." SoftBank Group is attempting to improve its financial standing after booking massive losses related to the performance of key investments such as WeWork and Uber.

The company has used its \$100 billion Vision Fund to pour enormous resources into the world's hottest start-ups. But Son's audacious deci-

sion-making approach has faced criticism over his commitment to start-ups some say are overvalued and lack clear profit models.

The group last year announced its long-mooted Vision Fund 2, again targeting funds of around \$100 billion, but investors have been slower to commit. In the latest statement, SoftBank Group said it will appoint new independent board members to improve its governance. —AFP

New Zealand CB to inject \$17.1bn into economy

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's central bank announced plans to spend NZ\$30 billion (US\$17.1 billion) on government bonds yesterday as a way of stimulating the virus-hit economy.

The move comes after the Reserve Bank of New Zealand last week slashed its base rate to 0.25 percent and the government unveiled a NZ\$12.1 billion spending package with a promise of more to come.

"The negative economic implications of the coronavirus outbreak have continued to intensify," the bank said in a statement. The monetary policy committee "agreed that further monetary stimulus is needed to meet its inflation and employment objectives."

New Zealand has 66 confirmed cases of COVID-

19 and no deaths yet in a population of around five million. The economy, heavily reliant on tourism and farm exports, is worth about NZ\$310 billion a year, making the bank's bond spending spree equivalent to almost 10 percent of gross domestic product.

The bank said global and domestic travel restrictions were impacting economic activity, with the number of people infected by the virus worldwide was rising rapidly. "The program aims to provide further support to the economy, build confidence, and keep interest rates on government bonds low," it said. The move was announced before the sharemarket opened, but initial reaction from analysts was positive. "The RBNZ has delivered today with a massive quantitative easing program," ANZ Bank's chief New Zealand economist Sharon Zollner said in a note to clients.

"We are optimistic it will succeed in bringing long interest rates back down and facilitating the required huge ramp-up in government spending," Finance Minister Grant Robertson said that while the central bank acted independently, the govern-



WELLINGTON: An Air New Zealand airplanes wait for passengers at Wellington International airport. New Zealand's central bank announced plans to spend NZ\$30 billion (US\$17.1 billion) on government bonds yesterday as a way of stimulating the virus-hit economy.—AFP

ment supported the purchase program. "We are all uniting together—the government, the Reserve Bank, private businesses and the retail banks—to cushion the impact on New Zealand from this global pandemic," he said. — AFP

Brazil's BNDES unveils \$11bn rescue package

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil's BNDES national development bank on Sunday unveiled a 55 billion reais (\$11 billion) package of measures to soften the coronavirus blow to the economy, with a focus on job preservation. The measures include suspending direct and indirect loan repayments to the BNDES, transferring cash to workers' FGTS severance funds, and making more resources available for micro, small and medium-sized companies.

"The bank has prepared and adjusted for countercyclical action. It is a first step in facing this crisis," said BNDES president Gustavo

Montezano, in a virtual press conference in which President Jair Bolsonaro also participated. "We are working on sectoral measures too, and we will announce them as soon as we can," Montezano added. Bolsonaro said that the government's objective is to preserve jobs, and appeared to soften his language on coronavirus. After saying recently there was a lot of "hysteria" surrounding the pandemic and its consequences, he said the disease is "something that afflicts us" and a cause for concern.

"I am sure that these (BNDES) measures will be particularly felt in the maintenance of jobs, which is extremely important. We will overcome this coronavirus crisis and keep jobs, because life continues," Bolsonaro said. Last week the government unveiled a near-150 billion reais support package, mostly bringing forward social assistance payments, deferring company taxes, and making it easier for people to access workers' severance funds. — Reuters



SAO PAULO: An electronic board shows the index chart at the Sao Paulo Stock Exchange (B3) in Sao Paulo, Brazil. — AFP

Business

Central banks deploy record sums to support markets, but may need more

Large ups and downs in asset prices and high volatility in forex markets

LONDON/BOSTON: Central banks have offered trillions of dollars of support to markets in recent days to keep them from freezing up, as investors worried about the economic damage from the coronavirus and made a chaotic dash for the exits.

While the intervention helped bring back some order to markets, policymakers may need to do more.

Investors, economists and bank strategists said they expect policymakers will have to step in with more support in the coming days to prop up both markets and the real economy - companies losing customers and workers thrown out of jobs. There is a limit for now to how effective authorities can be, however, some said. Before investors calm down, these observers said, they will need to see a peak in new virus infection rates, an improvement in hospitals' ability to cope with an influx of patients, and an end in sight to the economy-killing quarantines, travel bans and other restrictions being imposed to save lives.

"The best that economic and financial policymakers can do right now is limit the damage. They cannot turn the economy around because this is a health issue, not an economic or financial issue," said Mohamed El-Erian, chief economic advisor to the German insurer Allianz SE, in an interview. Estimates of the sums required to keep Corporate America afloat are reaching eye-popping levels. Ray Dalio, founder of hedge fund giant Bridgewater Associates LP, estimates the financial losses for US companies from the coronavirus-induced slump could be about \$4 trillion. That's nearly one-fifth the value of America's total economic output last year. The government will have to come to the rescue, Dalio told Reuters via email, backed by a central bank that prints money. "What needs to happen is very similar to what happened in the war years, but

without the fighting," Dalio said. Governments ramped up their support quickly in recent days as it became clear that the scale of the hit from the virus is likely to be huge. Last week was the worst since 2008 for the US stock market. Less visible in the stress building up in other markets that keep the real economy humming, such as the markets where companies go to raise short term cash to pay staff and where cities go to raise money for roads and schools. Many central bank measures have been aimed at reducing the strain in those areas.

These steps have ranged from slashing interest rates and ramping up bond buying programs to the Federal Reserve's resurrection of funding facilities from the financial-crisis era. These steps have eased the strain, but analysts and investors said they didn't go far enough, and new areas of concern have emerged. One success: The Fed has made it easier for other nations' central banks to obtain dollars to meet runaway global demand for the greenback. As the Fed acted, a key measure of the premium investors pay to access the US currency fell to its lowest level since March 3. The measure, known as the euro-dollar swap spread, fell to less than 4 basis points, or 0.04 percent, on Friday after going as wide as 86 basis points yesterday. But in a sign that the thirst for dollars globally remained unquenched, the US currency remained strong.

A spokesman for the Fed declined to comment on a request sent Sunday evening.

Traders also complained during the week about problems trading US government bonds and other kinds of debt amid large price swings. There has been a shortage of buyers despite the Fed providing more funding and purchasing some types of assets. Yields continued to rise in municipal debt markets, for example, where the



NEW YORK: The New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) stands in lower Manhattan in New York City. Central banks have offered trillions of dollars of support to markets to keep them from freezing up as investors worried about the economic damage from the coronavirus. — AFP

Fed's support was limited to short-term debt and highly rated issuers. Yields rise when bond prices fall.

In commercial paper markets, where companies go to access short-term funding, the Fed launched on Tuesday a new facility that buys commercial paper from highly rated companies. It helped, said Blake Gwinn, a strategist at NatWest Markets Plc, but the borrowing costs were higher than expected and the facility was too limited in targeting the strongest borrowers. In a research note Friday, he wrote that without significant changes, the program "would not do much to unplug" the commercial paper market. Gwinn, a former trader for the New York Federal Reserve, said the central bank should become a direct buyer of clogged assets, rather than "merely providing funding and hoping" that

banks and other players will do the heavy lifting. Some analysts and industry sources argued for loosening of bank regulations which, in their view, are restricting liquidity - the ability to easily buy and sell assets. Suspending these rules, they argue, will make it easier for banks to step in as market makers and lenders in a bigger way.

"The next crucial step in aiding liquidity will be to ease bank regulatory constraints," TD Securities strategists wrote in a note.

High volatility

One sign that the measures so far are insufficient: persistent volatility in markets. Volatility - large ups and downs in asset prices - is at extreme levels, as measured through indicators such as the market fear gauge in stocks and the Deutsche Bank

Currency Volatility Index in currencies.

High levels of volatility have forced funds and banks to sell their positions or step back from market-making, the all-important role of go-between in big trades, as they try to keep the amount of risk in their portfolios in check, bank strategists said. That, in turn, has led to more sellers than buyers, resulting in gaps between bid and offer prices of assets, which exacerbates market volatility.

Some of the measures taken by the Fed - such as buying bonds and lending money to banks so they can step in as buyers for some of these assets - are aimed at ending that logjam. But these steps have not managed to soothe the markets. One example is the market for Treasury bonds, one of the world's most liquid assets. Prices continued swinging sharply last week. In normal times, Treasury yields move a few basis points, or hundredths of a percent. The 10-year Treasury saw a 43-basis-point swing in yield on Friday, versus a swing of about 27 points on Wednesday and Thursday.

Another concern for central banks that is gaining more urgency: corporate credit.

US and European corporate debt markets have seized up, with markets for new issuance of bonds virtually shut and spreads spiking in secondary markets. The costs that companies pay to borrow in bond markets have surged to multi-year highs and remain highly elevated despite the central bank moves. Adding to the stress, ratings agencies have started downgrading companies as the revenue squeeze gets worse. Allianz's El-Erian said he suspected that a coordinated US Treasury and Fed attempt is in the works to counter market failures in areas US authorities have not yet targeted, such as the market for corporate credit. That intervention, he predicted, would be made "over the next few days, not even weeks." — Reuters



The coronavirus pandemic has hammered markets around the world.— AFP

European markets dive 4%, Asia stocks nosedive

LONDON: European stocks dived more than four percent in opening deals yesterday as the coronavirus death toll continued to soar and US lawmakers failed to agree a trillion-dollar emergency package. London's benchmark FTSE 100 index of major blue-chip companies tumbled 4.8 percent to 4,943.51 points, Frankfurt's DAX shed 4.6 percent to 8,521.94 and the Paris CAC 40 sank 4.4 percent to 3,870.06, compared with Friday's closing levels.

Asian equities were also hammered despite vast economic stimulus efforts worldwide, with investors spooked once more by the relentless COVID-19 pandemic. "Markets are again showing stress on fears that the economic damage will be worse than anticipated and that the response by governments and central banks will not be enough to prevent a mammoth recession," said analyst Neil Wilson at trading site Markets.com.

"James Bullard, President of the St Louis Fed, said US unemployment could reach 30 percent in the second quarter due to coronavirus shutdowns, while he warned GDP could decline by 50 percent. This would be an unprecedented event." The global death toll from the virus has surged past 14,400, with nearly a billion people confined and non-essential businesses shut in dozens of countries and growing fears about a recession.

"Countries across the globe (are adopting) increasingly stricter measures to stop the spread of coronavirus," added City Index analyst Fiona Cincotta. "These very measures are threatening to overwhelm central banks' efforts to cushion the economic fallout from coronavirus, increasing the prospect of a deep global recession." Asian markets were hammered yesterday despite massive economic stimulus efforts worldwide, with investors

spooked by the relentless march of the coronavirus pandemic.

Wellington nosedived 7.6 percent as New Zealand announced a four-week lockdown to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The Hang Seng Index in Hong Kong ended the day down 4.9 percent. Sydney dropped 5.6 percent, Shanghai shed 3.1 percent and Taiwan was off by 3.7 percent. Singapore tanked 7.5 percent, Jakarta lost 3.8 percent, and Seoul was down 5.5 percent.

Tokyo was the exception, closing two percent higher as a cheaper yen against the dollar boosted Japanese markets. Nikkei heavyweight SoftBank Group said it would sell up to \$41 billion in assets to finance a stock buyback, reduce debt and increase its cash reserves, boosting its share price by more than 18 percent in the last hour of trade.

The grim trend continued when European markets opened. In early trade, London tumbled 4.8 percent, Frankfurt lost 4.6 percent and Paris was down 4.4 percent.

Economists and analysts are now worried about how deep the impact of the pandemic could be on the global economy, with social distancing measures and lockdowns dealing serious blows to many industries. Airlines have been hit particularly hard, with isolation measures shutting down routes and grounding fleets worldwide.

Long-haul giant Emirates announced a two-week suspension of all its passenger flights, following a UAE government directive. Singapore Airlines, meanwhile, said it would ground most of its fleet until the end of April. The carrier said it was facing the greatest challenge in its existence. European plane maker Airbus said it was cancelling its planned 2019 dividend payment and abandoning 2020 forecasts.—AFP

Dollar rises but doubts about stimulus vote narrow gains

TOKYO: The dollar held gains against most peers yesterday as fresh declines in stocks accelerated the flight to cash, although it lost ground against the euro and yen as US lawmakers failed to pass a stimulus package to fight the coronavirus.

Legislators in Washington were unable to clear the stimulus measures on Sunday and a vote yesterday was ruled out as Republicans and Democrats tussled over the details of a proposed \$1 trillion spending package. Some investors who had bet on a big stimulus vented their frustration by selling the dollar against the yen and the euro, but analysts warn this move is likely short-lived as the majority of investors unwind positions to hold cash.

"We've moved from risk off to a phase where major players are competing with each other for the safety of holding dollars in cash," said Yukio Ishizuki, FX strategist at Daiwa Securities in Tokyo.

"There are still a lot of investors who need to sell riskier assets, and they want to hold their money in dollars." Against the yen, the US currency bounced between gains and losses but last traded down 0.6 percent at 110.07.

The dollar initially rose against the euro to the strongest since April 2017 but then pared

gains to trade 0.4 percent lower at \$1.0742 per euro. The common currency got a lift after European Central Bank Governing Council member Ignazio Visco said policymakers stand ready to take further steps if needed in response to the virus, which has paralysed Italy's economy.

The ECB stunned investors last week by launching 750 billion euro emergency bond purchase scheme.

The greenback erased gains and fell 0.3 percent against the pound to \$1.1694, pulling back from the strongest since at least 1985. US political uncertainty added to the tense mood in Asia.



Partisan battles in the Senate stopped a \$1 trillion-plus coronavirus response bill from advancing on Sunday, but talks continued over Democrats' demands for more funding for medical care and state and local efforts to combat the pandemic. The bill is Congress' third effort to blunt the economic toll of a disease that has killed at least 420 people in the United States and sickened more than 33,000.

Nearly one in three Americans was ordered to stay home on Sunday to slow the spread of

the disease, while Italy banned internal travel as deaths there reached 5,476.

US President Donald Trump has approved disaster deceleration requests from New York and Washington, while St. Louis Federal Reserve President James Bullard warned unemployment could reach 30 percent unless more was done fiscally. Elsewhere, the dollar extended gains. It closed in on multi-year highs against the Australian and New Zealand dollars as the economic costs of self-isolation triggered the largest intraday decline ever in New Zealand shares.

Investors have been liquidating positions in safe-havens and other riskier investments to keep their money in dollars due to the uncertainty caused by the epidemic.

Major central banks have ramped up efforts to ease a global dollar funding crunch, but the U.S. currency remains in demand due to the high degree of uncertainty about the unknown flu-like virus.

Investors have to pay 86 basis points (bps) over interbank rates to swap 3-month yen into dollars, cross-currency basis swap rates showed yesterday. This is less than a 139 bps premium reached on March 19, but swap rates are still above average. The dollar has also surged against many emerging market currencies, highlighting the growing sense of risk aversion across the globe.

In Asian trading, the dollar rose to a record high against the Mexican peso and the highest since December 2018 against the Thai baht. So far this year, the dollar is up 26 percent against Brazil's real, up around 11 percent against the Korean won and up 20 percent against the Indonesian rupiah.—Reuters

Dubai Expo 2020 to 'adjust' preparations

DUBAI: Organizers of the Expo 2020 global trade fair, set to launch in Dubai in October, said Sunday that they will "reassess and adjust" preparations due to the novel coronavirus outbreak. Dubai, which boasts the most diversified economy in the Gulf, is hosting the six-month Expo, with the hope of attracting around 25 million visitors.

"As we continue to prepare for this event, we will reassess and adjust planned preparations, as changing circumstances require," organizers said in a statement. "Expo 2020 Dubai is closely monitoring ongoing developments and taking all sensible precautions to manage and mitigate the risk to everyone involved in the Expo."

But the statement did not clarify the nature of the changes. Dubai, known for hosting hundreds of conferences annually, has scrapped a string of cultural and entertainment events in recent weeks but has not announced any plans to postpone the much-anticipated Expo. The United Arab Emirates on Friday announced its first two deaths from the COVID-19 disease, having reported more than 150 infections so far.—AFP

How Alibaba's Freshippo adapts to virus-hit China

SHANGHAI: As people in China retreated indoors in late January to avoid the coronavirus, Alibaba's supermarket chain Freshippo faced a dilemma: online orders for fruit were soaring but supplies were low. To ease the crunch, Freshippo asked staff to rip up bulk fruit boxes, originally prepared as Lunar New Year gift sets, break them up and sell them individually to serve more locked-down customers.

Freshippo, which has about 200 stores across the country and is known as Hema in Chinese, also launched a group-buying scheme for locked-down Wuhan - the epicenter of the outbreak.

The company then delivered goods via commissioned buses instead of its usual bike-riding couriers, who deliver individual bags of groceries. Freshippo's measures offer some lessons to retailers in Europe and the United States as they brace for a similar spread of the disease, with panic-buying leaving supermarket shelves stripped of many staples and other essential items.

"Nobody saw this coming," Hou Yi, president of Freshippo said in an interview with Reuters.

"A whole ton of challenges sur-

facted." Hou said supermarkets might face more difficulties in the United States because most stores were less equipped to deal with large numbers of online orders compared with their counterparts in China. Freshippo, which had stocked up ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday to meet the usual surge in demand, sent its inventory of dry goods such as noodles and flour to a warehouse in Shanghai to centralize delivery. Five-year-old Freshippo's biggest challenge was delivering in Wuhan and its province of Hubei. The government set up roadblocks, a shortage of staff disrupted operations and social-distancing requirements hindered last-mile delivery.

Freshippo had to obtain special permits to enter and exit Hubei and find volunteers from within its staff to drive trucks into the disease-stricken province, as they faced a mandatory 14-day quarantine after coming back out, Hou said. To cope with low staff numbers in stores, the company hired thousands of people from restaurants and shops, employing those thrown out of work because of government-mandated shutdowns of small business.—Reuters

Water crisis deepens in Jordan amid lockdown

AMMAN: Complaints and concerns over water shortages rose by 58 percent in Jordan in the first day after a country-wide curfew was instated, water authorities said Sunday. Jordan, the world's fifth most water-stressed nation due to climate change and overuse, is trying to cope with increased demand from the public during coronavirus lockdown measures, said Ministry of Water and Irrigation spokesman Omar Salameh.

With schools and businesses shut down, and a full-fledged lockdown in place since Saturday, people are consuming more water at home, he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Climate change, water theft and groundwater used twice as quickly as it's replenished, make water security challenging in Jordan where the population has risen to about 10 million from 7 million at the start of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011. In Jordan, municipal water is distributed to neighborhoods on a rotational cycle of once a week on average to urban areas and about once every two weeks to less accessible rural areas.

"A lot of the calls we received were from areas that were not yet due for their distribution," Salameh said. "They wanted to make sure their water supply is coming." The government announced Wednesday it would bring water to a number of northern cities as well as parts of the capital Amman where it had been cut off days earlier due to contamination concerns caused by disruptive spring rains. In the hours after Jordanians were ordered to stay at home or face a year in prison, panicked citizens reached out to water authorities on Facebook to complain about water shortages. "Water distribution should be constant during this difficult time as we use more of it to clean and sanitize," wrote Zainab Howaide on Sunday, adding she had not had water for two days at her home in a southern neighborhood of Amman.

In response to people's growing water anxiety, local radio station Husna FM launched a community initiative promising to help secure water for people struggling with shortages.

The ministry is carrying out an emergency response plan to the coronavirus crisis and is sending water distribution tanks to areas in need, Salameh said. — Reuters



A water tanker primes the water for Syrian refugees in front of their homes in the Al-Zaatri refugee camp in the Jordanian city of Mafraq near the border with Syria. — Reuters

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Lifestyle | Gossip

KIM KARDASHIAN WEST HAS URGED HER FOLLOWERS TO 'STAY HOME' DURING CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC



Kim Kardashian West has urged her followers to "stay home" during the coronavirus outbreak. The 'Keeping Up with the Kardashians' star has sent a stern message to her fans - particularly those who are "young and healthy" - on Instagram, asking them to "care about the health and safety" of others by making sure they stay at home and practice social distancing in order to try and stop the spread of the respiratory illness, also known as COVID-19. Writing in an Instagram Story, Kim explained: "Please everyone, especially people who are young and healthy, pls take the directive to stay home seriously if you care about the health and safety of your mom, father, grandparents, sisters, brothers, children and community." Unless you are leaving your home to go to work, restock on necessary food and essentials, to see your doctor or to help someone in need such as

an elderly neighbor, please do not ignore the severity of the warnings to stay inside to stop the spread of this virus. (sic)" Kim, 39, went on to remind people the virus doesn't "discriminate" and can infect anyone, as she sent "lots of love" to her fans. She concluded: "Also a reminder that this virus does not discriminate against race, age, gender, etc. This applies to us all and we will get through this together. Sending everyone lots of love and keeping everyone in my family's prayers. (sic)" The beauty also shared a second post of helpful tips to stop the spread of coronavirus, including making sure people wash their hands, avoid gatherings, and keep at least six feet away from other people. Meanwhile, Kim - who has children North, six, Saint, four, Chicago, two, and Psalm, 10 months, with husband Kanye West - recently revealed she has been sanitising everything someone else has touched before she'll han-

dle it herself. The SKIMS Shapewear founder admitted she was "not down" with giving her daughter a toy make-up kit from her sister, Khloe Kardashian, because she'd seen the 'Revenge Body' host have a coughing fit. In an Instagram video, Kim was speaking to a doctor named Caesar and said: "So doc, Khloe handed this to me, but I don't want to touch it because she handed it to me. Do you have any sanitizer? I cannot give that to my daughter." She then used a Clorox wipe to rub the surface of the box and added: "This is the new jam of what I'm doing every time someone even hands me something. I saw her cough and I'm not down for that. Okay, now I can give it to my daughter."

Chrissy Teigen defends Vanessa Hudgens

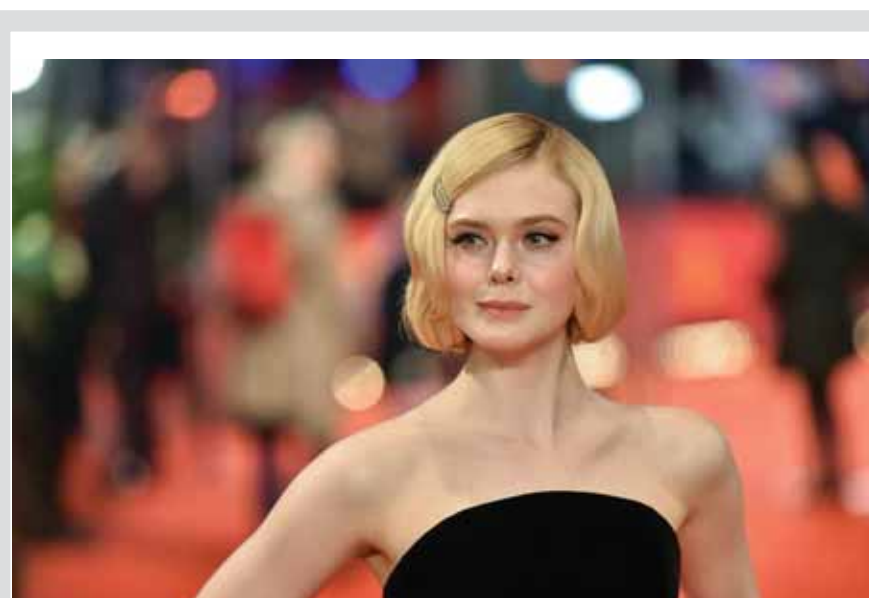
Chrissy Teigen has urged people not to "ruin" Vanessa Hudgens' life following the backlash against the actress' coronavirus comments. The 'High School Musical' star faced fierce criticism for saying deaths from the respiratory disease were "inevitable" but now the Sports Illustrated model has jumped to her defence and insisted lots of people say "really stupid s**t" but they should be allowed to learn from their mistakes. Chrissy tweeted: "sometimes people, especially famous people, are gonna say really stupid s**t. & so are you. and they, and u, will learn from it & hopefully their history says they're good. it's ok. And at the same time, wow they really had a dumb moment. but u don't have ruin their lives. "This isn't about me this time. but it will be one day, or it'll be you. but yeah today it's Vanessa lol. And no, life is rarely ruined for anyone. but you are damn well trying your best. just stop.(sic)" Vanessa has

apologized for her "insensitive" comments and admitted the outcry had been a "huge wake up call". She wrote on Twitter: "I realize my words were insensitive and not at all appropriate for the situation our country and the world are in right now. This has been a huge wake up call about the significance my words have, now more than ever.(sic)" Taking to the social media platform after US President Donald Trump said it may take until July for everything to get back to normal, the 31-year-old actress made her controversial comments. She said: "Until July sounds like a bunch of ****. I'm sorry, but like it's a virus, I get it, I respect it. "Even if everybody gets it, like yeah, people are going to die which is terrible, but inevitable? I don't know, maybe I shouldn't be doing this right now."



Gigi Hadid embraces farm life

Gigi Hadid loves being on her family farm because she doesn't have to worry about "how [her] hair looks". The 24-year-old model loves going to her mother Yolanda Hadid's Pennsylvania property because it reminds her of the "simple pleasures" of life and stops her having to think about her appearance in case she's photographed by paparazzi. She said: "The farm has really made me remember, and bring back to my life, my most simple pleasures. "It's allowed me to fill my days off with the little things that make me happy, like art, gardening, yoga, cooking, being outside, and spending time with my loved ones and animals without having to worry about things like what I'm wearing or how my hair looks, or being photographed or seen that day. "Being away from the city and the public eye makes me feel like a kid again, and that freedom has been really healing for me." When she's at the farm, Gigi loves to try new things and was particularly proud when she managed to use her time to make her own chairs. Answering questions posed by her celebrity pals - including Kendall Jenner, Blake Lively, Taylor Swift and Jimmy Fallon - for Harper's Bazaar magazine, the model said: "When I'm spending time on the farm, I find it fun to try something new and see if I can pull it off. "It's liberating to just create without the end goal of it being necessary to finish. The chair idea came from that. "I wanted to see if I could build a wood frame first and then pour resin into it and make a clear chair. I built the wood part and then through the next step learned that you can only dry resin in small layers, and the more layers I added, the more it was clear that I didn't make my frame tightly sealed enough. Failed miserably. "I ended up giving up on the big one and made a small-scale version, which worked a lot better! "I like the 'Try and fail and try again method. It keeps it fun and interesting for me, and even through failures you can learn so much."



Elle Fanning thinks 'everyone needs' a silk pillowcase

The 21-year-old actress insists the soft bedding is vital because it is so gentle on her hair and skin. Asked her number one beauty secret, she said: "I swear by silk pillowcases. They're great for my hair and skin. "I think everyone needs one." Plus I sleep with conditioner in my hair once a week. It's not comfortable but I do it for the health of my hair, which is so blonde and prone to breakage." The 'Maleficent' star admitted people don't always realize she has a "natural curl" to her hair and when she isn't working, she rarely does anything to style her locks. She told Britain's Glamour magazine: "A lot of people don't realize as it's usually poker straight, but my hair has a natural curl. "I don't wash it every day and, unless I'm going to an event, I just leave it in its natural state. "If it's a really bad hair day, I'll whip it up into a messy bun - but that's my go-to, off-duty look." Elle - who has been a face of Miu Miu since 2014 - previously

admitted she loves working with the brand because of its "quirky edge" as she has always celebrated being "different", regardless of what other people thought of her choices. She said recently: "I remember growing up, I would experiment with my fashion and at school I would be made fun of for it a little bit, just for being different and I still am that girl. "Miu Miu is defiantly off beat and it is quirky in being feminine, but with an edge. She balances all the opposites at one time. [Miuccia Prada] knows what girls want and what women want. Her shapes are just so amazing and quite actually boyish in the way that she cuts pieces like coats ... but then they'll have something like a little chick on them. "She keeps the fun. Mrs. Prada doesn't take herself too seriously which is very important in art. Miu Miu is just the all-round perfect brand. I could wear all of it."

Spears blasts online bullies over cruel comments



Britney Spears has blasted online bullies for criticizing her bathing suit photos. The 'Toxic' hitmaker has fired back at trolls complaining about her social media posts, as she admitted "all the mean comments" do get her down. In a lengthy Instagram post, she wrote: "I've read a lot of things online of people criticizing my posts ... saying I post the same 15 pictures with the same red background and wearing the same white bathing suit. "For me I get really excited about my posts ... and I like to share them with you all !!!! I've never owned a white bathing suit before and I simply liked the red background!!!! "Reading all of the mean comments really hurts my feelings ... and I wanted to share because you really shouldn't be saying all of these mean things to someone you don't even know (sic)" The 38-year-old star called for people to "be nice" to each other as the world is dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. She added: "This goes for bullying anyone really!!!!!! Hard times like we are currently living through should really teach us to be nice to

one another (sic)" Meanwhile, Britney also apologized to any followers "offended" by photos she posted of horses - which appear to have been deleted. She continued: "I saw some people were offended by me posting about horses yesterday I am truly sorry if I offended anyone. "I think it's important to see things that bring happiness during hard times and making light of a situation can sometimes help people!!!! I love you all stay safe and be nice!!!! (sic)" Britney - who has called out bullies in the past - previously revealed she has "self-esteem problems". She explained: "Body language is everything! The way you speak to yourself and carry yourself can effect your mood "I have self-esteem problems so I slouch ... These poses help me everyday become stronger and it's quite fun doing them. I feel so different everytime I do it, cause I'm not used to the feeling of my back being out!!!! (sic)".

Jennifer Lopez is a 'born sneakerhead'

The 'Hustlers' star made sure her new footwear collection with DSW included plenty of casual shoes because they were always her favourites in her younger days and she still wears them "a lot". She said: "I was a tomboy growing up. And even when I was a dancer in my late teens and early 20s, it was all about Doc Martens, Timberlands, and combat boots. "And I'm from the Bronx, so I'm kind of a born sneakerhead—where I come from, your sneakers say a lot about you. It's a big deal, what kind you're wearing, how you style them. "So sneakers are a big part of the new line. Believe it or not, I do wear them a lot." However, that doesn't mean the sneakers she's designed will be flat as the singer-and-actress - who is 5'5" tall - will "always" boost her height when she can. She added to Elle.com: "My [DSW] sneakers have quite a lift in them, actually. "You know the sneakers with the really sick bottoms, like

Balenciaga? That's the kind I like. I mean, I'll always take an extra half an inch if I can get it. Absolutely." The 50-year-old singer-and-actress - who has 12-year-old twins Max and Emme with ex-husband Marc Anthony and is engaged to Alex Rodriguez - remembered dancing in heels for the first time when she was at her junior prom aged 16 and how "grown up" she felt. She said: "Back then, you dyed your heels to match your dress. You got these satiny shoes and you sent them out to get dyed so they'd be the same color as your gown, and that was so grown up. "That was the way to do it when you were from the Bronx and going to prom back then, and I was like, 'I am not taking these off, they're amazing.' "So I made it through the whole dance with my heels on, but in the limo afterwards, I think I took them off. You're with your girls, and you make your date hold them."



Lifestyle | Features



Washingtonians and tourists walk around the tidal basin to see this year's Cherry Blossom's despite the outbreak of Coronavirus, COVID-19. — AFP photos

In Washington, *cherry blossoms* test isolation's limits

As Washingtonians muddled through coronavirus-induced isolation Saturday, the city's famed cherry blossoms reached maximum bloom, offering an enticing temptation to test the limits of self-distancing. The delicate flowers opened just as many of the last vestiges of entertainment closed in the city, which is physically situated around a core of public attractions. Among them are the US Capitol and Smithsonian museums, now closed to visitors, as well as looming homages to former presidents such as the Washington Monument obelisk, also shuttered.

On Friday the cherry trees, which line the capital's Tidal Basin, officially reached "peak bloom" — a time of year that normally attracts some 1.5 million visitors, many from out of state or overseas. With tourism plummeting, global movement of populations sharply curtailed and stay-at-home orders beginning to go into effect in a handful of US states, many of the tourists were gone.

In their place the pandemic had churned out a new type of visitor: local coronavirus shut-ins buoyed by the prospect of fresh air. So much so that by Saturday, the National Park Service urged "anyone considering a visit to see the cherry blossoms to reconsider" as it

announced traffic controls and closed parking in an attempt to prevent crowding. Even with crowds substantially reduced compared with other years, the recommended six-foot (two-meter) berth was rendered nearly impossible to maintain. Mary McGreevy from the nearby town of Alexandria, Virginia was walking around the Tidal Basin on Thursday with her two daughters in what she called "a rare outing."

The 43-year-old educator told AFP she was not "terribly worried," but noted that "as people pass by you, you know you're not six feet apart." As the pink and white flowers burst from nimble branches on the trees that encircle the large pond-like waterway, the city announced its 98th confirmed case of coronavirus on Saturday.

Trees 'there next year'

"I think people feel that because there's no walls, that personal risk assessment might have changed," said Julie Fischer, a professor of microbiology at Georgetown University. "If you go outside to someplace that's really crowded," she noted, "then you put yourself at risk of being in close proximity to someone who's potentially infected." Earlier in the week the



city's public transportation authority warned potential visitors that "the trees will be there next year," before closing two metro stops closest to the Tidal Basin "to prevent cherry blossom travel."

Official National Cherry Blossom Festival organizers canceled an annual kite festival and parade and instead installed a "BloomCam" so that the trees could be viewed live from home. But for some the temptation of seeing the real thing was too strong. "It's out in the fresh air, and I figured there wouldn't be that many

people and there are not; this is like 10 percent of what's normally here," said Mary Ann Canter.

But the 65-year-old retiree, who had a lung transplant one and a half years ago, was forced to return to her car to get a face mask when she and her husband found that "nobody stays away from each other." She paused to speak to AFP outside the entrance to a paddle-boat dock where more than 5,000 rides were taken last March, and more than 16,500 last April. On Thursday morning, two lonely bright-blue paddle boats plied the water, but by Saturday, ahead of the elevated turnout, the facility had closed down "until further notice." The drastic reduction in tourists meant a steady stream of Washington's notorious runners could make their way through. "The risk that someone would cough or sneeze on you as you're running by is not high but it's not zero," said Fischer, noting that safe outdoor activity is important to avoid isolation's "mental toll." The scientist, who had been asked to work remotely more than a week ago, spoke to AFP from her home, adding that it felt like "a protracted period already." —AFP



Don't stop the music: DJ D-Nice hosts 10-hour Instagram dance party

Just because there's a pandemic going on, doesn't mean the party has to stop. And one DJ has kept it going — for 10 hours at a time. The coronavirus has upended daily lives, with thousands of deaths around the world. Many people are staying at home in an effort to stem the rapid-fire spread. Celebrity DJ D-Nice has begun hosting virtual dance parties on his Instagram Live channel in an effort to lift spirits as people self-isolate over coronavirus concerns.

Many of his A-list friends — including Rihanna, Common and John Legend — have made guest appearances thanks to Instagram Live's split feature, which lets two people appear in a split-screen. On Wednesday, D-Nice posted on Instagram that he would be hosting "Home School," a "social distancing dance party." He set up his turntables in his kitchen and invited his 950,000 followers to tune in and dance along. What followed was a nine-hour long party that featured guest appearances from celebrities such as LL Cool J, Mary J Blige, Naomi Campbell and Lena Waithe. "I can't believe that I started the Home School social distancing dance party just four days ago and it's become a place for us to virtually dance together and stay connected," D-Nice wrote in an Instagram post Thursday. "From my kitchen, I'm able to send positive vibrations to each of you."

D-Nice, who first entered the music scene in the 1980s as a member of the Bronx hip-hop group BDP, has begun hosting nightly dance parties in his kitchen, officially dubbed "Club Quarantine." More than 100,000 people tuned in for his Saturday celebration, which lasted for 10 hours and had appearances from former first lady Michelle Obama, presidential hopefuls Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders, and musician Diddy — who also sent the DJ a bottle of Ciroc vodka, in which Diddy owns a stake, during the set. —AFP

Scrapping Japan cherry blossom 'like taking hugs away from Italians'

Preventing Japanese from gathering to enjoy cherry blossom season because of the coronavirus would be like "taking hugs away from Italians," the governor of Tokyo said on Thursday. Yuriko Koike however urged people to refrain from traditional "hanami" parties where friends and family gather under cherry blossom trees for copious quantities of food and drink. After a meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Koike said: "We discussed what to do with hanami. It is open-air. The metropolitan government wants people to admire the flowers." "I think taking hanami away from the Japanese is like taking away hugs from Italians," she said.

"But we would like to ask people to refrain from, for example, spreading blue tarps and enjoying fun parties at Ueno Park like every year," she added, referring to a large central Tokyo park popular with revelers. Meteorologists expect

cherry blossoms to begin blooming around March 17 in Tokyo. Koike has previously said that indoor events hosted by her organization or involving food would be postponed or cancelled between February 22 and March 15. The Tokyo marathon earlier this month was restricted to elite athletes only but Koike and other top officials have insisted that preparations for the Olympic Games — scheduled to open on July 24 — are going ahead as planned.

Italy is the worst-hit country in Europe and the country has been placed on effective lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus that has killed more than 800 people in just over two weeks. Italians have been told to keep at least a meter (three feet) from each other and handshakes — and hugs — are frowned upon. —AFP



A woman wearing a facemask amid concerns over the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, takes a photograph with her smartphone of cherry blossom at a park in Beijing. —AFP



Iraqi children play on a mini table football in their home in the capital Baghdad on March 22, 2020, as Iraq extends country-wide lockdown until March 28. —AFP

Netflix commits \$100m to help actors, crews thrown out of work

Streaming television giant Netflix on Friday launched a \$100 million fund to help actors and production crews endure the hit to paychecks caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The fund is meant to help offset hardship in the "creative community," with most of the money going to financially troubled workers on Netflix productions around the world, according to Netflix chief content officer Ted Sarandos. "This community has supported Netflix through the good times, and we want to help them through these hard times, especially while governments are still figuring out what economic support they will provide," Sarandos said in an online post.

Netflix is in the process of figuring out details of how money from the fund will be distributed. The Silicon Valley-based company had already committed to keeping casts and crews of suspended productions on the payroll for an additional two weeks.

"Almost all television and film production has now ceased globally — leaving hundreds of thousands of crew and cast without jobs," said Sarandos. "These include electricians, carpenters, drivers, hair and makeup artists and more, many of whom are paid hourly wages and work on a project-to-project basis." About \$15 million of the fund will go to organizations and non-profit groups providing emergency relief to out-of-work film crews and actors in countries where it has a large production base. "What's happening is unprecedented," Sarandos said.

"We are only as strong as the people we work with and Netflix is fortunate to be able to help those hardest hit in our industry through this challenging time." The move comes amid "shelter in place" orders in California and many other areas, and the closing of many business operations that could result in a surge in joblessness. —AFP



The sun sets behind the derelict West Pier in Brighton on the south coast of England on Sunday. Up to 1.5 million vulnerable people in Britain, identified as being most at risk from the coronavirus epidemic, should stay at home for at least 12 weeks, the government said Sunday. — AFP

Online tutors boosting incomes as demand surges due to lockdowns

MANILA: Filipino teacher Raven Kate De Leon is in demand, spending up to 10 hours a day at her home computer surrounded by mini cars and stuffed toys that she uses as props to inject fun into her English classes for students far away in China. Since the coronavirus took a hold in China at the start of this year and forced schools and offices to shut down, thousands of Filipino teachers are cashing on overtime as grade schoolers and professionals in China, Japan and beyond turn lockdowns into opportunities to better their English.

One of only a few countries in Asia that can combine affordable e-learning with an ample supply of teachers and strong English proficiency, the Philippines is uniquely placed to absorb demand in Asia for Internet language classes. Online platforms like 51Talk of China Online Education Group and RareJob Philippines, and a host of smaller local Philippine outfits, have seen demand and usage soar since February, bucking the devastating effect on the world's economies from coronavirus, which has infected more than 337,500 people and killed more than 14,500.

"I usually have 20 classes every day, so I could meet the demand of the great number of students nowadays," said De Leon, 22, who works for 51Talk. "I take that opportunity to give them a fun and fruitful distraction because I know they're stressed, worried." De Leon is currently now working from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., without a day off. 51Talk charges around 45 yuan (\$6.36) per 25-minute session, with teachers earning around 130 pesos

(\$2.53) per hour.

China shut down its schools in February to contain infections. More than two dozen countries followed suit, sending more than 290 million children and youths out of school, data from UNESCO, the United Nations' cultural agency, showed. "More and more, the safe way to continue learning is to go online," said Jennifer Que, country head of 51Talk, which has 20,000 partner-teachers in the Philippines. Many online teachers in the Philippines typically work from home, which has insulated them from the home quarantine measures that have devastated businesses and restricted tens of millions in the Philippines, which has nearly 400 confirmed cases.

Shares in the \$419-million China Online Education has surged 154 percent year-to-date, compared to the NYSE composite index's 34 percent slump in the same period. Other e-learning firms like TAL Education Group, New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc and GSX Techedu Inc have seen their shares rally up to 24 percent, 17 percent and 112 percent, respectively, notably at the height of the school closures in mid-February.

RareJob, which has around 6,000 Filipino tutors and specializes in the Japan market, saw its users nearly double to 800,000 since February. CEO Gaku Nakamura told Reuters. Japan shut down its schools last month to halt the coronavirus spread. "In these kinds of situation, parents do not want their kids to go out," Nakamura said, adding that

ices for two weeks starting from March 25. "We are very sorry for any inconvenience caused to our customers and travellers. These measures are in place to contain the spread of COVID-19, and we hope to resume services as soon as feasible," it said. The UAE announced on Friday its first two deaths from the COVID-19 disease, having reported more than 150 cases so far.

Gulf countries have imposed various restrictions to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the air transport sector. The UAE has already stopped granting visas on arrival and forbidden foreigners who are legal residents but are outside the country from returning.

Meanwhile, disgraced Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein has tested positive for the novel coronavirus, US media reported Sunday. Weinstein, 68, is in prison in northern New York state after being sentenced to 23 years in jail for rape and sexual assault. The fallen film producer's diagnosis was reported Sunday evening by celebrity news website TMZ and local paper the Niagara Gazette. Weinstein's spokespeople have declined to comment to US media on the subject.

The New York State Department of Corrections did not respond when contacted by AFP for confirmation of the reports. Sources told TMZ that Weinstein was one of two inmates to test positive at the high-security Wende Correctional Facility northwest of New York City and that he has had no contact with family or his lawyers since his diagnosis. Prior to his transfer, he stayed at Rikers Island prison and a Manhattan hospital, where he was treated for chest pains.

Crowded US prisons have the potential to become hotbeds for coronavirus infections. Last week, guards at Rikers and New York's Sing Sing prison tested positive for the virus, local media reported. As of Sunday, the virus has killed 417 people in the US out of more than 33,000 cases, according to a tracker managed by Johns Hopkins University.

Weinstein was convicted in February of a criminal sexual act in the first degree and rape in the third degree, while being cleared of predatory sexual assault charges. He was convicted of raping ex-actress Jessica Mann in 2013 and of forcibly performing oral sex on former production assistant Mimi Halesy in 2006. Nearly 90 women, including Angelina Jolie and Salma Hayek, have leveled sexual misconduct allegations against Weinstein, the Oscar-winning producer of "Shakespeare in Love" and numerous other critical and box office hits. — Agencies

RareJob's monthly fee of \$60 for Japanese students and \$100 for business-level English is cheaper by up to 40 times versus learning centers in Japan.

Japanese teenagers form the bulk of Kristine Concepcion's 26 daily students. "I'm happy to be of service in this situation and I admire them for still choosing to learn," said Concepcion, a RareJob tutor of five years, who uses candy, Astroboy and stuffed toys to keep her child students engaged. But not everywhere can cope, including the southern city of Davao, which has a backoffice industry comprising 50,000 mostly call centre agents, but no more than 300 home-based online tutors.

"We could not meet the demand," said Samuel

Matunog, president of the industry group, ICT Davao. "Every day, we are asked if we still have a supply of teachers." Regardless of whether school and work shutdowns will continue for much longer, online learning firms are hoping to leave a lasting impression on an underserved market.

51Talk wants to engage 100,000 Filipino tutors by 2025 or earlier and hopes its teachers will get good ratings and referrals after the surge in customers to ensure demand after coronavirus containment measures are over. "Of course we don't want this outbreak to last a long time but this is the best moment. If teachers do their best, even after things normalize, students will look for them," said country head Que. — Reuters

Uncertainty in Qatar area sealed over virus fears

DOHA: Foreign workers in Qatar living in an area sealed off to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus have complained of a lack of information, as a rights group warned conditions put residents at risk. Qatar has reported 481 confirmed COVID-19 cases so far, making it the second worst-affected Gulf nation. Last week, after a number of cases were detected in the densely populated working class district southwest of the capital Doha known as the Industrial Area, authorities restricted residents from leaving for an initial two-week period.

Rights group Amnesty International warned that "cramped conditions" put residents at risk, but the government has insisted healthcare had been reinforced in the district. Amnesty has called for "people (to) have access to healthcare, including preventive care and treatment for everyone affected, without discrimination". Several workers from South Asia living in the Industrial Area told AFP over the weekend they have access to healthcare and food supplies, but felt they were being left in the dark by authorities.

"There are some shops open, everyone is healthy, no problem. (But) we are getting no information," said one man working at a builders' merchant in the Industrial Area, who gave his name as Mahmoud. Another man, who did not want to give his name and is employed at an industrial supplies showroom,

said the "area is blocked, we cannot get out. Small shops are open," adding that "nobody is sick here". His colleague said they had "no idea" when the lockdown would end. "The road is blocked, there is a certain boundary and beyond that boundary, nobody can go or come in."

The area is mostly frequented by migrant laborers and includes light industrial premises, showrooms, as well as commercial and residential properties. The district has been ringed with police checkpoints and a decontamination unit deployed to disinfect vehicles used to deliver supplies. Officials have not said how many people were under lockdown in the area.

Ninety percent of Qatar's 2.75 residents are foreigners, many of them from poor developing countries working on projects linked to the 2022 World Cup. Rights groups have previously criticized labor practices in Qatar, which has responded with a raft of initiatives to enhance worker welfare and improve its image abroad.

Assistant Foreign Minister Lolwah Al-Khater, the public face of Qatar's COVID-19 response, paid "special tribute to those in Qatar who are under quarantine - including in the Industrial Area". In a video posted on Twitter Saturday, she assured people confined to the area that the government was working to "support local residents, and safeguard (their) health and well-being". Extra medical services had been deployed to the area, she added.

Qatar has yet to report any deaths from COVID-19, but has imposed strict nationwide measures to contain its spread, including bans on non-citizen arrivals and large gatherings, including for prayer. Authorities also closed schools, restaurants and non-food stores. — AFP

Curfew in Saudi; UAE shuts malls...

Continued from Page 1

The world's top crude exporter faces plunging oil prices, the mainstay of government revenue, which have slipped to around \$25 a barrel to touch multi-year lows on the back of sagging demand due to the virus and a price war with Russia. More than 1,300 coronavirus infections have been detected in the Gulf region, with most cases initially identified among travellers returning from Iran which is one of the world's worst affected countries.

Dubai's famous malls will shut down for a fortnight under the United Arab Emirates' plan to curb coronavirus, which will also see its airports closed to passenger and transit flights. The decision to close commercial centers takes in shopping centers as well as fresh food markets, but pharmacies and food retail outlets will be allowed to stay open. Restaurants are limited to home deliveries.

The health ministry and the disaster management authority said in a statement early yesterday that the move would come into force within 48 hours and last "for a renewable period of two weeks". Dubai's vast shopping centers include Mall of the Emirates, which has its own indoor ski slope, and Dubai Mall which is one of the world's largest and features a giant aquarium.

The move came as UAE authorities announced they would suspend all passenger and transit flights for two weeks, as the coronavirus outbreak prompts many countries to shut their borders. Cargo and emergency evacuation flights are exempt from the measure. "Additional examination and isolation arrangements will be taken later should flights resume in order to ensure the safety of passengers, air crews, and airport personnel and their protection from infection risks," they said in a statement.

The UAE is home to two major international airports, in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which are major transit hubs. Yesterday's announcement came hours after Dubai carrier Emirates said it would suspend all passenger flights by March 25, only to swiftly reverse its decision. It later said it "received requests from governments and customers to support the repatriation of travellers" and would continue to operate passenger flights to 13 destinations.

However, after the new UAE suspension the airline confirmed it would suspend all passenger serv-

Amir heads Cabinet session, hails...

Continued from Page 1

He praised the efforts of all those who put their lives on the line in the service of the country during these turbulent times, saying that their efforts will always be remembered.

HH the Amir also commended the National Assembly speaker and MPs for their cooperation with the Cabinet during the coronavirus crisis, saying that their collaboration will contribute to the fight against COVID-19. Sheikh Sabah also thanked all members of the society and the private sector for their positive contribution to battle the spread of the disease.

Commenting on the situation globally, the Amir expressed remorse over the impact of the coronavirus on the world, saying that it was necessary on the national level to continue the stride to safeguard Kuwait during such a crisis. "Everybody realized that food rations and supplies are abundant in the country," said HH the Amir, who added that it was important to protect such resources from overconsumption and irresponsible use. He stressed that in the current situation, it is important to "focus on controlling the pandemic and saving lives as a priority".

HH the Amir affirmed it was important to look forward beyond the current situation and address social, economic and educational consequences as a result of the virus spread in the future. Sheikh

Sabah said that he was aware of the grave impact of the spread of the virus on the morale of Kuwaitis and residents alike; however, he affirmed that Kuwait will overcome the coronavirus through unity, solidarity and sacrifice. He urged for patience and confidence during these troubling times to overcome this grave situation.

Kuwait yesterday confirmed one new coronavirus case during the past 24 hours. During a press conference, the Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said the case is of a Kuwaiti woman who recently returned from the UAE, bringing the number of infections in the country to 189. The spokesman revealed that out of the 189 cases, 30 have recovered and 159 are still receiving treatment. Five cases are still in the ICU. Some 702 individuals have completed the quarantine period, Sanad added. The ministry urged citizens and residents to abide by all the decisions and recommendations issued by official authorities.

The ministry of commerce and industry yesterday announced that based on a Cabinet decision, it will pay the difference in cost between air- and sea-shipped meat and foodstuff imported during the crisis. A statement issued by MoCI explained that the ministry will pay the price difference to keep prices under control and ensure the availability of goods.

The statement also explained that these measures are part of preparations made for the upcoming holy month of Ramadan and in a bid to avoid losses meat and foodstuff importers might suffer due to the increase in freight costs under the current circumstances. Expressing its keenness on providing all local market needs and strategic reserves, MoCI urged importers to visit its commercial control department. — Agencies

Classifieds

Tuesday, March 24, 2020

Kuwait Times
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 Fax: (+965) 24348714
www.met.gov.kw

Expected Weather for the Next 24 Hours

BY DAY: Warm with light to moderate north westerly wind, with speed of 12 - 35 km/h and some scattered clouds will appear.

BY NIGHT: Rather cold with light to moderate north westerly wind to variable wind, with speed of 08 - 28 km/h.

| WEATHER WARNING | | | No Current Warnings | | |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------|--------------------------------|--|--|
| STATION | MAX. EXP. | MIN. REC. | SFC. CHART 23/03/2020 0000 UTC | | |
| KUWAIT CITY | 23 °C | 14 °C | | | |
| KUWAIT AIRPORT | 24 °C | 13 °C | | | |
| ABDALY | 24 °C | 10 °C | | | |
| BUBYAN | - °C | - °C | | | |
| JAHRA | 24 °C | 12 °C | | | |
| FAILAKA ISLAND | 22 °C | 13 °C | | | |
| SALMIYAH | 22 °C | 15 °C | | | |
| AHMADI | 22 °C | 14 °C | | | |
| NUWAISIB | 25 °C | 13 °C | | | |
| WAFRA | 24 °C | 12 °C | | | |
| SALMY | 23 °C | 09 °C | | | |

| 4 DAYS FORECAST | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------|---|--------------|-------|----------------|--------------|
| DAY | DATE | WEATHER | Temperatures | | Wind Direction | Wind Speed |
| | | | MAX. | MIN. | | |
| Tuesday | 03/24 | Warm and Clouds will increase gradually | 26 °C | 15 °C | VRB-SE | 08 - 28 km/h |
| Wednesday | 03/25 | Warm and Partly cloudy with a chance for scattered light rain | 27 °C | 16 °C | SE | 12 - 40 km/h |
| Thursday | 03/26 | Warm and some scattered clouds will appear with a chance for fog forming at night | 27 °C | 14 °C | SE | 15 - 38 km/h |
| Friday | 03/27 | Warm and Partly cloudy with a chance for scattered light rain | 28 °C | 17 °C | SE | 12 - 40 km/h |

| PRAYER TIMES | |
|--------------|-------|
| Fajr | 04:30 |
| Sunrise | 05:49 |
| Zuhr | 11:55 |
| Asr | 15:23 |
| Sunset | 18:01 |
| Isha | 19:18 |

| RECORDED YESTERDAY AT KUWAIT AIRPORT | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| MAX. Temp. | 23 °C |
| MIN. Temp. | 16 °C |
| MAX. RH | 73 % |
| MIN. RH | 21 % |
| MAX. Wind | N 53 km/h |
| TOTAL RAINFALL IN 24 HR. | .44 mm |

Hospitals

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

Clinics

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

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

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 |
| Middle East Airlines | 22423073 |
| Lufthansa | 22422493 |
| PIA | 22421044 |
| Bangladesh Airlines | 22452977/8 |
| Oman Air | 22958787 |
| Turkish Airlines | 22453820/1 |

Daily SuDoku

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

very hard

Yesterday's Solution

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

hard

STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)
 If you've been thinking about taking a trip, Aries, this isn't the day to make plans. Whatever you learn today about airline schedules or hotels may not reflect the situation as it really is. If you wait a few days, things should go far more smoothly. If you already have plans to leave, expect some delays. Don't let them put you in a gloomy state of mind! Make up your mind to have fun!

Libra (September 23-October 22)
 Short trips in your neighborhood may be rendered nearly impossible today by factors above and beyond your control, such as traffic, construction, or both, Libra. If you have errands to run, put them off. If you can, walk or ride a bicycle. If you must go in the car, however, make sure you have your favorite music with you so you can do something while waiting in traffic. Otherwise, you'll go crazy with boredom.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)
 A letter or phone call regarding money that you may be expecting may still not come today, Taurus. This could put you in a panic and cause you to want to phone those responsible to see what's going on. Don't be surprised if you end up playing phone tag. This just isn't a good day for any sort of communication. Your call will come. Just hang in there for a day or two more.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)
 This isn't the day to take care of paperwork, Scorpio, particularly if it involves money. Your mental processes are slower than usual, and you may find that you're easily distracted. Your mood won't be all that great either, so it might be a good idea to wait a few days before tackling tasks like this. If the work is urgent, ask for help. You'll be able to stay more focused if you do.

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.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)
 Communication with partners is likely to be poor to nonexistent today, Sagittarius. This isn't the time to enter into contract negotiations or other discussions that could affect your future in a major way. The prevailing mood is down, so whatever you decide today is apt to reflect that mood. It might be best to wait a few days until everyone is in a more positive frame of mind. Hang in there!

Cancer (June 21-July 22)
 Are you feeling a little under the weather, Cancer? You may have been burning the candle at both ends. The obvious tip would be to slow down, but you might feel it isn't possible now. Get as much rest as you can and be sure to eat right. Ask for help if urgent work needs to be done. That way it will get done quickly even if your energy level isn't up to snuff.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)
 Whatever work you do today could go more slowly than usual, Capricorn, as you're apt to be a bit distracted. You may be preoccupied with the past, especially with feelings and events you thought you'd long forgotten that affect your mood in various ways. This might be a good day to concentrate on routine tasks that you can do automatically, if possible. That way you'll be as productive as always.

Leo (July 23-August 22)
 A long-anticipated visit from a close friend or love partner may have to be postponed, Leo. This could be rather disheartening. You may fear that the postponement implies that the visit will never happen, but this isn't the case. Your friend has probably run into a few snags that need to be straightened out. Be patient and hang in there. All should work out as you want, albeit a bit later!

Aquarius (January 20- February 18)
 Phone calls and emails between you and your friends may get misplaced or otherwise go astray, Aquarius. A little patience is called for when trying to reach anyone at this time, especially if modern technology is involved. If a matter is urgent, it might be best to do the old-fashioned thing and actually go see the person in question. That's the only way to ensure reaching anyone right now.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)
 Career matters may be put on hold today, as important communications you're expecting fail to come on time, Virgo. As you're anxious to conclude the matters involved, you could make yourself crazy with frustration. Don't do this. Find something else to do while you're waiting and the time will pass more quickly. You'll get something done besides. Your primary concern will be resolved, just not when you'd hoped. Be patient!

Pisces (February 19-March 20)
 Delays and frustrations could plague you throughout the day, Pisces, especially regarding communications. A young visitor you're expecting at your home today could be delayed in some way and might not be able to call and let you know. Don't waste any time worrying. Your friend is probably safe and will eventually turn up. Congested traffic and other unforeseen annoyances are probably to blame. Hang in there.

APPLE MAZE

Help the worm to find its way out of the apple!

Sports

IOC admits postponing Olympics an option, but cancellation 'not on agenda'

Around 70 percent of the athletes support postponement of Games

LAUSANNE: The International Olympic Committee said Sunday that postponing the 2020 Olympics is one of its options as the world grapples with the coronavirus pandemic, but that cancellation of the Tokyo showpiece was "not on the agenda".

The IOC has faced strong pressure to push back this summer's Tokyo Games, scheduled from July 24 to August 9, from sporting federations and athletes worried about the health risk as the COVID-19 global death tally rose past the 13,000 mark.

On Sunday, IOC President Thomas Bach, a former Olympic fencing gold medalist, told athletes a decision on the Games would be made "within the next four weeks". "Human lives take precedence over everything, including the staging of the Games," Bach wrote in a letter.

He acknowledged that this was a time of "tremendous uncertainty" which, he said "destroys hope." "We have, as indicated before, been thinking in different scenarios and are adapting them almost day by day," he said.

But, he added that "there are significant improvements in Japan" and he still had hopes the Games could be held on schedule, even if that would present logistical difficulties. "A final decision about the date of the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 now would still be premature," he said.

Bach explained that the IOC was discussing its options with health authorities and "stakeholders". "We are confident that we will have finalised these discussions within the next four weeks." He made clear that there would be a Games in Tokyo at some point.

THUMBS DOWN

"Cancellation would not solve any problem and

would help nobody," Bach said. "Therefore it is not on our agenda."

The idea of holding the games on schedule has drawn a swelling chorus of objectors. On Sunday, nine-time Olympic track and field champion Carl Lewis, as well as the head of French athletics added their voices to the US and French swimming federations, the US and Spanish athletics federations, the Norwegian Olympic Committee and past and current athletes.

Sprinter and long jumper Lewis, who won gold at four different Olympics, told Houston television station KRIV, that he backs calls for postponement. "I just think it's really difficult for an athlete to prepare, to train, to keep their motivation if there's complete uncertainty. That's the hardest thing."

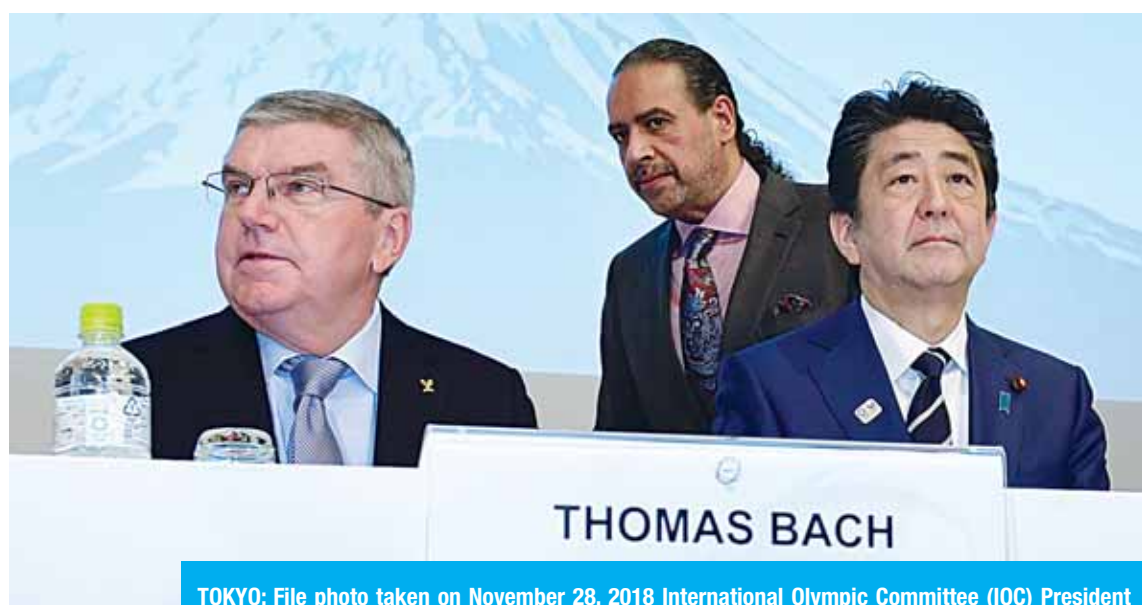
IOC is being really selfish

ing that may hurt, but in reality, you have to focus on what (will best serve) the masses."

US media reported on Sunday that American athletes had voted during a virtual town hall with US Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) officials and given Tokyo the thumbs down.

The IOC has sent a questionnaire to National Olympic Committees about the impact of the coronavirus crisis on Games preparation. Alfons Hoermann, head of the German NOC, on Sunday explained what he wanted to know in a message to athletes.

"The aim is to clarify which of you might want to take part in the Olympic Games on the dates



TOKYO: File photo taken on November 28, 2018 International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach (L), Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (R) and Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) President Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Sabah attend the XXIII ANOC General Assembly in Tokyo. A decision to postpone the 2020 Olympics "may become inevitable" if the new coronavirus outbreak makes it impossible to hold the Games safely. —AFP

planned and who is in favour of another date." In the USA, almost three-quarters of the 300 athletes who met on-line with USOPC supported delaying the Games, USA Today reported.

In all, with another 23 percent saying it would depend on the consequences, according to details supplied by a member of the USOPC Athletes Advisory Council.

'REALLY SELFISH'

Almost a quarter wanted a decision no later than April 15, while 18 percent wanted an immediate decision. "I feel the IOC is being really,

really selfish in trying to push it," US hammer thrower Gwen Berry told USA Today. "And there's no need to push it."

US swim and athletics trials to determine the nation's two largest Olympic delegations are set for June. The head of the French athletics federation said postponement was inevitable. "Everyone agrees that the Games cannot be held on the dates planned," Andre Giraud said.

"If the crisis is contained by the end of May, we can envisage a postponement of the Games to the autumn. But Plan C would be a six-month or one-year postponement," he said. —AFP

Australia freezes domestic competition

MELBOURNE: Rugby Australia has shelved plans for a domestic competition in lieu of Super Rugby following a government crackdown on non-essential travel because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The remodelled competition had a planned start date of April 3 but had been suspended until at least May 1, Rugby Australia (RA) said yesterday. "Rugby Australia and the Super Rugby teams have made the decision today to suspend the start of the revised competition on the latest guidance from the various government and health authorities and our Chief Medical Officer," RA chief executive Raelene Castle said in a statement. "Our priority is the health and welfare of our athletes and our wider Rugby community as we continue to adapt to an unprecedented and constantly-evolving situation for our game and society."

RA had planned to put on a domestic competition after Super Rugby, which involves teams from New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina and Japan, was suspended after the New Zealand government imposed strict border controls.

The halt of the franchise-based competition was a major blow for RA and partner unions in the southern hemisphere, which rely on broadcast revenues to support their domestic games.

Two more Australian states said on Sunday they would close their borders from Tuesday to restrict the movement of people, following similar actions in the Northern Territory and Tasmania announced last week. —Reuters

Carl Lewis wants Olympics postponed for up to two years

WASHINGTON: Nine-time Olympic track and field champion Carl Lewis says he wants a delay of up to two years for the Tokyo Olympics but rejects any bid to cancel them outright.

The 58-year-old US athletics legend told Houston television station KRIV that he backs the calls for postponement by USA Track and Field and USA Swimming due to disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"The best part about that is they're creating some solidarity in their message," Lewis said.

"I just think it's really difficult for an athlete to prepare, to train, to keep their motivation if there's complete uncertainty. That's the hardest thing."

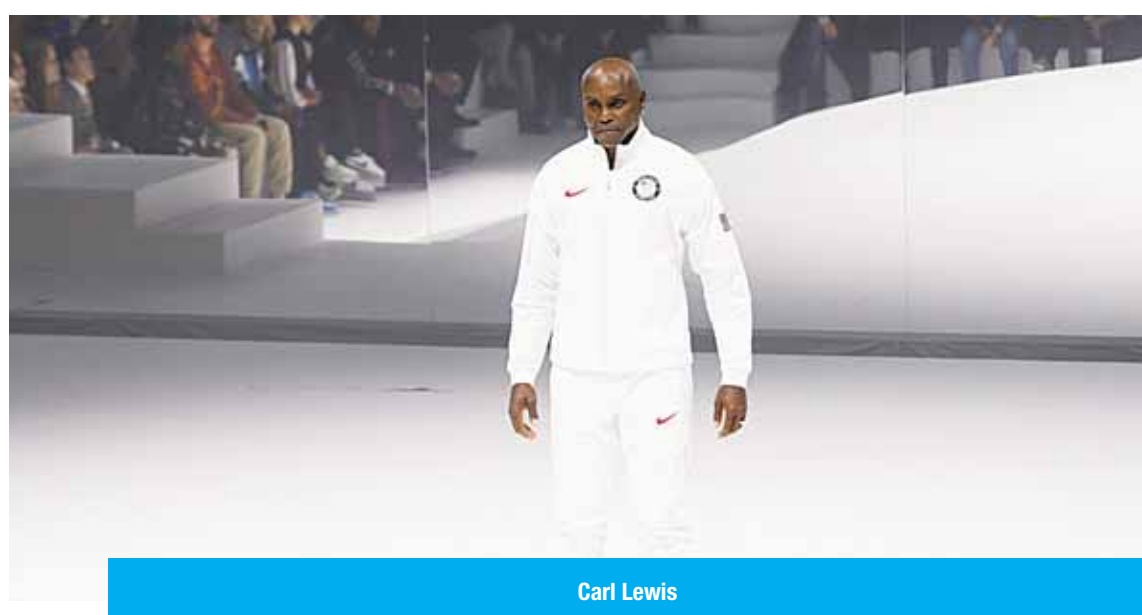
"Because it's a health issue, it's beyond everyone's control. I think most athletes are accepting that." The Tokyo Olympics are set to start July 24 while US swim and athletics trials to determine the nation's two largest delegations for the event are set for June. Many athletes have struggled to continue training while being forced to stay home to avoid spreading the deadly virus.

"The athletes cannot prepare for an Olympic Games if they don't have an Olympic Trials, if they don't have competition," Lewis said.

"I think USATF, in this case, stepped up. I think they're creating a voice that puts the athletes first and I think the athletes appreciate it."

Lewis called upon the International Olympic Committee to consider pushing back the Olympics to 2022, after the scheduled 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

"If we delay what should we do?" Lewis said. "I



Carl Lewis

think a more comfortable situation would be two years and put it in the Olympic year with the Winter Olympics and then make it kind of a celebratory Olympic year. "There are some athletes who are right on the edge of retiring that that may hurt, but in reality, you have to focus on what (will best serve) the masses."

2022 TOKYO, 2024 PARIS?

For Lewis, that would mean staging a Tokyo Olympics only two years ahead of the 2024 Paris Olympics.

"Two years isn't a big deal, and then two years later we have the summer (Olympics) again. I think that that would kind of give them time to re-prepare," Lewis told the TV station.

"I just think there's a way to put sports in its perspective, understand the athletes' lives and their

dedication and give them a second chance they deserve in a way that they can be respected and also have a chance to be the best they can be."

Lewis, an assistant coach for the University of Houston track team, knows the pain of missing an Olympics. He missed out on the 1980 Moscow Games after qualifying in the long jump and 4x100m relay when the United States boycotted the event.

Lewis said any idea to cancel the Tokyo Olympics outright was wrong.

"That would be devastating and what happens is, then all of a sudden you take the athlete's voice out of the conversation," Lewis said.

"Canceling to me would be a non-starter for the athletes. It's just not fair. If you delay and say this is what we're going to do, then it gives the athletes a chance to make a positive out of a negative." —AFP

Sports events around the world hit by coronavirus pandemic

NEW YORK: Major sports events around the world that have been hit by the coronavirus pandemic:

OLYMPICS

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics torch lighting ceremony in ancient Olympia was held without spectators.

Tokyo 2020 organisers received the Olympic flame in a scaled-down handover ceremony that was closed to spectators.

The Hellenic Olympic Committee suspended the remainder of the torch relay through Greece to avoid attracting crowds.

OLYMPIC TRIALS

US trials for wrestling (April 4-5) were postponed.

US Rowing postponed its team trials.

US diving trials (April 3-5) were postponed. All USA Diving events postponed for next 30 days.

COURT OF ARBITRATION FOR SPORT

The Court of Arbitration for Sport said all cases were being put on hold until May. No in-person hearings will be held before May 1.

NORTH AMERICA

The NBA suspended its season.

The NHL suspended its season.

The MLB further delayed its 2020 season's opening day of March 26 after CDC calls for gatherings of 50 or more people to be cancelled or postponed for eight weeks.

Boston Marathon organisers postpone the race from April 20 to Sept. 14.

The National Hockey League told players, including those from outside North America, that they can return home and should self-quarantine through March 27, lengthening the period the NHL had said it was pausing its season.

SOCCER

Euro 2020 was postponed. Europe's flagship tournament will now be staged from June 11 to July 11, 2021.

This year's Copa America, originally scheduled for June-July in Colombia and Argentina, was postponed to June 11-July 11, 2021.

FIFA has agreed to delay the first edition of its revamped Club World Cup due to be held in 2021.

UEFA put all club and national team competitions for men and women on hold until further notice.

All elite games in England, including the Premier League, Football League and Women's Super League, were suspended until April 30 but the current season can be extended indefinitely.

Germany's Bundesliga and second division will pause at least until April 2.

UEFA postponed all Champions League and Europa League matches due to take place between March 17-19.

South America's two biggest club competitions, the Copa Libertadores and Copa Sudamericana, were suspended until at least May 5.

The CAF postponed two rounds of the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers (March 25-31).

CONCACAF suspended all competitions, including the Champions League and men's Olympic qualifiers.

The top two tiers of French football — Ligue 1 and Ligue 2 — were suspended.

All matches in Spain's top two divisions were postponed for two weeks.

US Major League Soccer suspended its season.

All soccer in the Netherlands was suspended until the end of March.

FIFA and AFC agreed to postpone Asian World Cup qualifying matches in March and June.

FIFA postponed South American qualifying matches for the 2022 World Cup between March 23-31.

Spain's Copa del Rey final between Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad (April 18) was postponed.

New seasons in the Chinese, Japanese and South Korean

leagues were postponed.

A four-team event in Doha featuring Croatia, Portugal, Belgium and Switzerland (March 26-30) was cancelled.

Asian Champions League: Matches involving Chinese clubs Guangzhou Evergrande, Shanghai Shenhua and Shanghai SIPG were postponed. The start of the knockout rounds was moved back to September.

The Asian Football Confederation postponed all AFC Cup 2020 matches scheduled for March and April.

The Brazilian football Confederation suspended all national competitions until further notice.

The state championships of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, the two biggest in Brazil, were suspended on March 16, the former for 15 days and the latter until further notice.

All events organised by the Russian Football Union, including Russian Premier League fixtures, between March 17-April 10 were cancelled.

The CAF postponed the African Nations Championship, a national team tournament for home-based players only (Cameroon: April 4-25).

The Turkish Super Lig, among the last to continue playing matches, was suspended after players complained. Basketball and volleyball leagues in the country were also suspended.

OTHER SPORTS

ATHLETICS

The Diamond League postponed its first three meetings of the 2020 season due to be held in April and May in Qatar and China.

The World Athletics Indoor Championships (Nanjing, March 13-15) were postponed. They will be held in the same city from March 19-21, 2021.

The Paris and Barcelona marathons were postponed.

The London marathon (April 26), was postponed to Oct. 4.

The Penn Relays (April 23-25), were cancelled for the first time in the event's 125-year history. The Mt. SAC Relays and Florida Relays, also scheduled for April, and the March Texas Relays, were all cancelled.

Kenya's athletics authority ordered the closure of training camps and clubs, hampering athletes' preparations for the Olympics.

AUSTRALIAN RULES

The Australian Football League's attempt to forge on with the season despite the virus outbreak lasted one round before it was shut down on March 22 in the wake of a government crackdown on non-essential travel.

BADMINTON

The Badminton World Federation cancelled the last five tournaments in the qualification period for the Olympics, making the All England Open played from March 11-15 the final event to count towards qualification.

BASEBALL

The final qualification tournament in Taiwan for the Olympics was put back from April to June 17-21, while the March 22-26 qualification event in Arizona was postponed.

Japan's professional league postponed the start of the season.

BASKETBALL

Euroleague Basketball suspended all 2019-20 EuroLeague, EuroCup and Euroleague Next Generation Tournament games.

BOXING

The European, American and final world qualifying boxing tournaments for the Tokyo Olympics were suspended on March 16. The European qualifier in London that was underway and due to run to March 24, ended after the evening session on March 17.

Anthony Joshua's world heavyweight title defence against Bulgarian Kubrat Pulev at Tottenham Hotspur's stadium on June 20 could be postponed if Spurs need the stadium to complete this season's Premier League fixtures.

CRICKET

The last two games of Australia's three-match one-day international series against New Zealand in Sydney and Hobart were cancelled.

Australia and New Zealand's limited-overs tours were postponed.

The start of the Indian Premier League T20 tournament (March 29) was postponed until April 15. —Reuters

Sports

Fitness, focus, frustration: Life in lockdown for Europe's footballers

Bayern Munich hold their first 'cyber-training' session

MADRID: Juventus midfielder Sami Khedira is learning to play the piano. La Liga clubs are facing off on playstation and Atalanta's Robin Gosens has been re-visiting for exams in psychology. Yet as thousands of footballers, from the highest levels to the lower leagues, remain on lockdown while coronavirus spreads across Europe, all of them are tasked with keeping themselves fit, as well as entertained.

"Everyone needs to be ready so that when the health advice says resume, we can resume straight away," Emmanuel Orhant, medical director of the French Football Federation (FFF), told AFP.

Nobody knows when that will be and with the global death toll from coronavirus passing 13,000 on Saturday, there is little appetite yet even to address the question. But within football, the absence of a deadline only enhances the sense of urgency. In theory, the season could restart in a matter of weeks and clubs are determined to be ready.

"Players may even need to get their summer break in now," Brighton striker Glenn Murray told AFP. "We might finish the 2019/20 season and then roll into 2020/21 without any break at all." Asked if the players would accept that scenario, Murray said: "We don't have any choice."

It means fitness coaches and club doctors are creating week-to-week conditioning programmes, personalised for individual players, explained through Whatsapp and Skype, and dependent on both technology and trust.

"Every one of our players has been given the guidance they need from our coaches, nutritionists and doctors," Real Betis head of medical Jose Manuel Alvarez told AFP. "It is up to them to take it."

Betis, who sit 12th in La Liga, have divided their squad into groups depending on physical characteristics, with one coach assigned to each. Devices then

send data on fatigue, sleep, pain and even moods while players submit reports to the doctors on their weight and temperature, and to the fitness department regarding targets achieved.

"Players know if they don't do their job they will be at a clear disadvantage against their teammates when normal training resumes," Alvarez says. In that sense, they are given no excuses. Many players already have gyms at home but club owners have paid thousands to ensure those without have all the equipment they need. "A football player's mechanics are precise, complex and sophisticated," Marseille president Jacques-Henri Eyraud told AFP. "And they require almost daily maintenance." Yet many clubs believe there is more to it than bikes and treadmills.

In Germany, Bayern Munich held their first 'cyber-training' session, when the players worked out through video-conference and then stayed online for an almost an hour to catch up.

In France, Lyon have told their players to rest until today, while in Spain, Atletico Madrid have done tactical work, with video meetings held between players and coaches to reinforce key messages. Atletico are also particularly stringent on diets. Like most clubs, they deliver meals devised by their nutritionists but players also choose between options for lunch and dinner, which they then eat at the same time as their teammates. Self-discipline will not come easy to some. "Of course some players are better than others at handling this situation," Jonathan Barnett, agent of Gareth Bale and Stella Group, told AFP. "Players are human beings too and at the moment they're very frustrated." Much will depend on personal circumstances. Lockdown can either offer the chance to spend more time with family or leaves family far away and unusually difficult to reach.

Inter Milan's Belgian striker Romelu Lukaku is un-

closed doors.

The idea created understandable interest in an Italian sports media market starved of anything to write about — or debate. It also prompted Brescia president Massimo Cellino to bluntly tell those thinking of playing during a national crisis that has killed close to 5,000 people in Italy to focus on saving lives.

"Life first. Life, damn it," the 63-year-old businessman told the Corriere dello Sport in a frank interview. "Everything has to be moved to the next season. It is time for realism, gentlemen. This is the plague," Cellino said.

'LUNACY'

Brescia is one of the cities in Italy's northern Lombardy region around Milan most heavily hit by the new infectious disease. Lombardy's death toll shot past 3,000 on Saturday. The region's 12-percent mortality rate among those officially infected is much higher than anything reported out of China's Hubei province at the peak of its outbreak this year.

None of the teams based in the region have expressed an interest in playing any time soon. This is not the case for those based around Rome or playing in southern regions that have been relatively spared



TURIN: File photo shows Inter Milan and Juventus players compete in an empty stadium due to the novel coronavirus outbreak during the Italian Serie A football match Juventus vs Inter Milan, at the Juventus stadium in Turin on March 8, 2020. — AFP

able to see his mother, who has high-risk diabetes, while Real Madrid's Luka Jovic broke self-isolation rules when attempting to visit his girlfriend in Serbia. "Some of our foreign guys have missed the opportunity to go home," Brighton's Murray said. "It's extremely difficult for them."

Older players like Murray, who is 36, also feel the frustration of time being wasted. "It's made me more determined to play as long as I can," Murray said.

And for those where football has forever been a way of life, boredom can quickly take hold. "It's so strange not being able to train," AC Milan goalkeeper Asmir Begovic said last week. "You try to do other things but there's only so much Netflix you can

watch." More generally, there seems to be an acceptance that no matter how thorough the programmes, players will return considerably less fit and far more prone to injury. Philippe Piat, president of FIFPro, which represents professional players worldwide, told AFP: "The doctors say 15 days off needs 15 days of training so what will it take if there are three weeks off? They were clear: don't be surprised if there are injuries."

"The risk of injury is something we really do expect," said Betis doctor Alvarez. "They will never reach the level of a normal training session, that's obvious. It's a strange and completely new situation for everyone." — AFP

Italy football boss wants season cancelled over plague

ROME: The head of an Italian football club based at the heart of the coronavirus pandemic in Brescia said it was time to cancel the Serie A season because of "the plague". The top Italian league's basement dwellers are destined for relegation — should the matches ever play out to their logical end in May.

No ball has been kicked in anger in the football-mad country since March 9 because of an outbreak that bore down on Italy from China last month. The nation of 60 million is under a lockdown that could well run for many more weeks.

Schools are not expected to reopen until after the summer. Stores may be shuttered for many weeks. The government ordered huge factories to suspend their operations Saturday night. Yet some Italian clubs with title aspirations are thinking of resuming practise in preparation for possible matches behind

Cook says four-day game may be curtailed

LONDON: Former England captain Alastair Cook has suggested the four-day County Championship may have to be curtailed or abandoned completely so officials can salvage "the most profitable parts of the English summer" following the coronavirus outbreak.

Friday saw the England and Wales Cricket Board announced that no professional cricket would be played in England and Wales before May 28.

The County Championship, which comprises four-day first-class matches — and which Cook helped Essex win last season — was due to start on April 12.

The Champion County match, the annual curtain-raiser for the year, was to be played between the Marylebone Cricket Club and Essex later this month in Sri Lanka, but had been called off. County Championship matches do not generate as much money as limited overs fixtures or internationals but are seen as vital as preparing players for five-day Tests, still widely regarded as the pinnacle of the game.

"I could have retired from all cricket when I quit the international stage in 2018 but I stayed on because I loved playing for Essex and that means the County Championship," wrote Cook, England's all-time leading Test run-scorer in his Sunday Times column.

"I couldn't have asked for a better first season back on the (domestic) circuit than winning the title in the last game of 2019. "Will we get to defend that title? As things stand, there will be no cricket in England until May 28 at the earliest. "I can say this because I have no financial interest in the outcome but it strikes me that those proposing that the authorities prioritise the most profitable parts of the English summer — The Hundred, T20 Blast and the national team — have a point."

The 35-year-old left-handed opener went on to ask: "Can we salvage the four-day competition? "Possibly but that will demand that we all pull in the same direction. "We may well be looking at an abbreviated tournament, with more back-to-back matches and stretching into early October (sometimes warmer than the second half of April when the season usually starts). We may, as a result, see more floodlit cricket and ticket prices will almost certainly have to be reduced.

"None of this is ideal but we all have to see the bigger picture — for our sport and the country as a whole," Cook wrote. —AFP



Marco Asensio

Real's Asensio wins gaming tournament

MADRID: Real Madrid forward Marco Asensio has missed the entire season with a serious knee injury but the time away from the pitch paid unexpected dividends when he was crowned champion of La Liga's FIFA 20 video game tournament on Sunday.

With Spanish soccer on hold along with most live sports while the world fights the coronavirus pandemic, players traded the pitch for Playstation in an online tournament organised by esports commentator Ibai Llanos and endorsed by La Liga.

Over 170,000 people watched Asensio, playing as Real, beat Aitor Ruibal of Leganes 4-1 in the final, the culmination of a weekend of action involving 18 La Liga sides. Barcelona and Real Mallorca were not allowed to take part in the tournament as

in the first month of an outbreak that has now spread around the world.

The capital region's Lazio — just a point behind perennial champions Juventus — have said they wanted to start training as early as yesterday. Italian media speculate they might postpone it until after the ban on public gatherings formally expires tomorrow.

Sixth-placed Napoli also aired plans to start practise next week. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has already indicated that all the national bans and closures will be extended for weeks if not months.

Torino club president Urbano Cairo told Italian media it was "lunacy" to be thinking about football during what Conte on Saturday called Italy's biggest disaster since World War II.

Cairo said clubs from region that had managed to largely avoid the outbreak were "foolish to argue (for a resumption) based on contagion data". Napoli's southern Campania region has recorded only 22 deaths. "Saying my region has no problem, when the situation is constantly changing, makes no sense," Cairo said. Brescia's Cellino agreed.

"This season is finished. Anyone who wants this cursed (title), take it. It is closed. Finished," the club president said. And I am not saying this because Brescia are last in the standings." — AFP

their clubs are sponsored by Konami, the creators of FIFA 20's main competitor Pro Evolution Soccer.

The tournament, which was also broadcast on Spanish television, raised over 140,000 euros (\$149,212.00) to fight the deadly COVID-19 virus, which has claimed over 13,580 lives worldwide and more than 1,720 in Spain.

The tournament built on the success of last week's FIFA 20 version of the Seville derby between Real Betis' Borja Iglesias and Sevilla's Sergio Reguilon, also organised by Llanos to fill the void left by the derby which had been postponed.

The Spanish sports media enthusiastically covered the online tournament, with leading newspapers Marca and AS broadcasting the matches on their websites as well as publishing match reports and live blogs of the games.

La Liga commentator Miguel Angel Roman joined Llanos in presenting the matches, while players gave interviews afterwards in another move to replicate the feel of a real life match. —Reuters

Football grinds to a halt, but not in Australia

SYDNEY: Football might have ground to a halt across the world, but not in Australia where they are soldiering on, with a handful of fans turning up to cheer on their teams outside shuttered grounds this weekend. The domestic A-League has six rounds to go and Football Federation Australia decided to press ahead without spectators amid the coronavirus pandemic, despite two of the 11 teams undergoing mandatory quarantine.

Like rugby league and Australian Rules, which are also pushing on with their seasons, it has lucrative broadcast commitments with the fear of financial repercussions part of the thinking.

In opting to keep going, Football Federation Australia head of leagues Greg O'Rourke said they were adhering to government directives and expert medical advice. "We understand that these are difficult times for everyone," he said.

"We will always put the health, welfare and safety of our players, coaches, match officials, volunteers, administrators and fans at the centre of our decision-making process." Australia is far from immune to the virus, and has sealed its borders, banning entry to anyone who is not a citizen or permanent resident from Friday evening, with more than 1,000 cases confirmed.

While the action continued, there were only four fixtures. That's because Wellington Phoenix and Melbourne Victory are serving mandatory 14-day quarantine stints after playing in New Zealand last weekend and failing to get back to Australia before tough new entry rules took effect. New Zealand-based Phoenix are making the biggest sacrifice, relocating to Australia so the season can be finished, separating them from friends and family for weeks, if not months. "The decision to travel to Sydney in an attempt to complete this season, was made as a club," said Phoenix general manager David Dome.

WEIRD TRIP

Despite being in quarantine since last week, health officials have allowed them to train at a remote facility. With both teams unable to play, their opponents this weekend, Brisbane Roar and the Newcastle Jets, faced each other instead with Roar winning 1-0, thanks to veteran forward Scott McDonald's first-half strike.

Despite the lockout, a handful of fans chanted and banged drums outside the ground during the game. "Incredible effort from this pair of Roar supporters #RoarAsOne," the team tweeted afterwards, showing a video clip of players walking to the turnstiles to applaud them at the end of the game. Not everyone approved, despite the players keeping their distance. "Really... told to stay away for safety reasons and the players clap that! No idea of the times we are living in," one supporter said on Twitter.

Coached by former Liverpool star Robbie Fowler, it was Roar's third win on the trot as they moved up to fourth. Melbourne City were also in action, thumping the Central Coast Mariners 4-2 in an eerily quiet Central Coast Stadium to strengthen their hold on second place behind leaders Sydney FC. They also had some die-hard support with Melbourne fan Will Pursley finding a vantage point outside the ground at Gosford, north of Sydney, to catch a glimpse of the action. —AFP

18 Carl Lewis wants Olympics postponed for up to two years



19 Fitness, focus, frustration: Life in lockdown for Europe's footballers



19 Real's Asensio wins gaming tournament



Canada pulls out of Olympics

Japan says delay may be 'inevitable'



TOKYO: Chief executive officer of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Toshiro Muto (L), and Tokyo 2020 president Yoshio Mori (R) attend a press conference in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

TOKYO: Canada pulled out of the Tokyo Olympics over coronavirus fears as Japan's prime minister yesterday admitted a delay may be "inevitable" and the International Olympic Committee said a decision should come within weeks.

Australia also told its athletes to prepare for a Tokyo Olympics in 2021 as expectations grew that the Games — scheduled to start on July 24 — would be postponed as the virus crisis convulses the globe.

Japanese and Olympic officials had stuck resolutely to the line that the Summer Games will go ahead on time, but criticism from athletes and sports bodies has swelled to a crescendo in recent days.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told parliament that Japan was still committed to a "complete" Games, but added: "If that becomes difficult, in light of considering athletes first, it may become inevitable that we make a decision to postpone."

It was the second major concession in a matter of hours after the IOC said "the scenario of postponement" was one of the options under consideration, with a final decision due within four weeks.

"Human lives take precedence over everything, including the staging of the Games," IOC president Thomas Bach wrote in an open letter to athletes after

emergency talks. "Cancellation would not solve any problem and would help nobody," Bach added. "Therefore it is not on our agenda."

'Not solely about athlete health'

Athletes and sports bodies have become increasingly vocal after restrictions imposed because of COVID-19 trashed competition schedules and often made training impossible — and risky.

Canada highlighted the dangers to the broader community as they became the first team to withdraw from the Olympics and Paralympics, urging a year's postponement. "This is not solely about athlete health — it is about public health," the Canadian Olympic Committee said.

"With COVID-19 and the associated risks, it is not safe for our athletes, and the health and safety of their families and the broader Canadian community for athletes to continue training towards these Games."

Canada's pull-out came despite the IOC promising to hold "detailed discussions" on the "worldwide

health situation and its impact on the Olympic Games, including the scenario of postponement", with a decision expected "within the next four weeks". Even this timetable was criticised, with Britain's world 200m champion Dina Asher-Smith calling it "irresponsible". "So wait... does this mean that athletes face up to another FOUR weeks of finding ways to fit in training — whilst potentially putting ourselves, coaches, support staff and loved ones at risk just to find out they were going to be postponed anyway," she tweeted.

"So irresponsible," added Asher-Smith. "I was really hoping to hear an announcement that they'd postponed it to 2021 this week."

The IOC is responsible for making any final decision on the Games, and has come under increasing pressure as the coronavirus emergency grows, with more than 14,400 deaths worldwide, according to an AFP tally.

It warned that the logistics of postponing the Games were extremely complicated, with venues po-

tentially unavailable, millions of hotel nights already booked and a packed international sports calendar.

However, Australian Olympic officials said "it's clear" that the Tokyo Games can't go ahead as scheduled and told its athletes to prepare for a year's postponement. "Our athletes have been magnificent in their positive attitude to training and preparing, but the stress and uncertainty has been extremely challenging for them," said Australian chef de mission Ian Chesterman.

US track legend Carl Lewis had earlier become just the latest prominent call for a delay, following similar demands from the American, French and Spanish athletics associations.

The virus has already had an impact on the Games, with qualifiers cancelled and events to celebrate the Olympic torch arrival and relay scaled back. Despite the measures, more than 50,000 people flocked to a cauldron displaying the flame in north-eastern Japan, raising fears about whether the relay can be held safely. Some waited in a 500-metre (yard) queue for several hours, Japanese media said. "I queued for three hours but watching the Olympic flame was greatly encouraging," a 70-year-old woman told public broadcaster NHK. — AFP



Virus crisis convulses the globe

Van der Burgh battling coronavirus

CAPE TOWN: Former Olympic swimming champion Cameron van der Burgh has said he has been battling the new coronavirus for the last two weeks and that athletes who continue to train for the Tokyo Games are exposing themselves to "unnecessary risk".

South African Van der Burgh won gold in the 100m breaststroke at the 2012 London Olympics and silver in Rio four years later before retiring in 2018. He said that while the most severe symptoms from the virus had passed he was still exhausted by any physical activity.

"I have been struggling with COVID-19 for 14 days today," he said on Twitter. "By far the worst virus I have ever endured despite being a healthy individual with strong lungs (no smoking/sport), living a healthy lifestyle and being young (least at-risk demographic)."

"Although the most severe symptoms (extreme fever) have eased, I am still struggling with serious fatigue and a residual cough that I can't shake. Any physical activity like walking leaves me exhausted for hours."

More than 14,600 people have died globally since the coronavirus outbreak began. Van der Burgh, 31, said athletes who contract the virus will struggle to get back in peak condition for the Games, which are scheduled to start on July 24, though there have been growing calls for the Olympics to be postponed.

Canada became the first country to boycott the Games due to the coronavirus pandemic and Australia on Monday told its athletes to prepare for the Olympics to be postponed to 2021. "The loss in body conditioning has been immense and I can only feel for the athletes that contract COVID-19 as they will suffer a great loss of current conditioning through the last training cycle. Infection closer to competition being the worst," he said.

"Athletes will continue to train as there is no clarification regarding the summer Games and thus are exposing themselves to unnecessary risk — and those that do contract will try rush back to training most likely enhancing/extending the damage/recovery time." — Reuters



Cameron van der Burgh