

Friday Times

ISSUE NO: 18091

SHAABAN 3, 1441 AH | FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2020

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Curfew Diaries: Day 4 - Curfew breakers



Scribbler's Notebook

By Jamie Etheridge

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The video shows a police patrol cruising through the empty streets of Kuwait, possibly Salmiya or Hawally, just after curfew, slow with lights flashing. The cruiser stops about halfway down the street and an officer steps out, calling towards a building with a glass-fronted ground floor. The officer yells again, then walks into the building, and a few seconds later, emerges with a man who was inside the building but not inside his apartment. Who is this man? What was he doing? Why was he not inside his flat after the curfew? The video doesn't tell us. Instead the man is taken to the patrol, placed inside and the police drive off.

Kuwait has arrested dozens of people already for breaking the curfew. It's possible, although unlikely, that these curfew breakers didn't know about the curfew. More likely they are either bored or fed up with staying at home or up to nefarious purposes.

The curfew is as much psychological as it is physical. The first few days were a novelty, something new to experience. We sat out on the balcony, waiting for the siren and disappointed when we heard only the loudspeaker urging people to go to their homes and stay indoors. On the second night of the curfew, our children rushed around getting everything 'ready' for the start of the curfew. And by this, I mean they made tea and cookies and we sat at the kitchen table chatting when the speakers called out. The next day, we celebrated the start of the curfew by having an early dinner, turning off our lights and lighting candles 'for the fun of it'.

Day 4 and the quiet is what catches my attention. I'm sitting on the balcony, listening to the birds twittering and working on my laptop, when all of a sudden I realize the quality of sound around me has changed. The regular hum of traffic on Al-Tawoun Street has disappeared. The noise of neighbors coming and going, the talking and chatting as people walk around the streets below fades into a stillness unusual for Kuwait, unusual for this time of day. I look at my phone and see that it's 5:15 pm. Ahh, I think, so the curfew has started.

Four days in and the curfew has lost its novelty. It hasn't yet solidified into normality, into just another mundane occurrence of daily life, but the newness of the experience has eroded, perhaps hastened by the weeks-long 'staying at home' many of us have already been practicing since the middle of the February holidays.

The silence is a welcome respite from the rush of daily life. If you have a comfortable space in which to retreat, the curfew can be something to look forward to, a time to close in upon ourselves, reflect and rejuvenate. As an introvert, I am always grateful for alone time where I can write, draw, read and relax.

Unfortunately, too many of us live in cramped conditions, in tiny flats with limited space and in many cases too many other people. Tens of thousands of workers here live in rooms lined with cots and not much else. How do they manage the long hours when going outside isn't a possibility? You can only spend so much time scrolling through Instagram and TikTok.

In such circumstances, the curfew becomes a daily challenge, a mountain to climb or a marathon to endure. When you are cramped into a tiny space with too many people, the curfew feels like a jail sentence instead of a respite. So it's possible that the curfew breakers are criminals out looking for things to steal, but some of them might also simply be people who don't have the space or comfort of a home indoors.



A view of Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Social distancing



Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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Washing your hands frequently and maintaining social distancing are the two basic tips we have been hearing about as protective measures against the new coronavirus. I have heard the first call many times since I was a kid, but it seems that some people until today don't care to wash their hands enough.

Another advice to the public is to keep at least a distance of one meter between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing, and now we are even keeping a distance with strangers in the supermarket because you simply don't know if they are infected with the virus or not. For individuals, to keep a social distance means keeping a distance between yourself and others in public places and avoiding physical contact with people who do not share your home. This method is intended to stop or slow down the spread of the virus.

Although the term social distancing is self-explanatory, the correct implementation is not as easy as it seems. In real life, doctors, parents and even government officials are struggling to make sense of it all by repeated messages, calls and campaigns, yet people are still getting together whenever they can when the curfew is over.

I also think a total curfew won't end this dilemma of social distancing, because people today want to stay close and maintain contact. This is why governments are finding it hard to control public attitude in time of curfew. I believe that social distancing is essential now - no large gatherings or groups, while keeping a distance from others. If this means no cinema, restaurants and dinner parties, let it be until this virus is controlled.

Social distancing can be anywhere. For example, authorities in Kuwait shut down all beauty salons and barbershops. I think this is a good step for now as it is common in ladies' salons to have many women, and workers may also get infected. The same applies to men as well.

Some people will still try to ignore important advice due to misinformation or stubbornness, especially among older people. I don't think we can blame them because they might be distracted between government directives, media reports and their own ideas and personal experiences. Now we are in the phase of a partial curfew these days like the rest of the world, but we need to heed medical advice all time, not only in the time of curfew, but all day long.



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PHOTO FEATURE



On Sunday, March 22, Kuwait imposed a partial curfew starting from 5pm until 4am the next morning. Across the country, streets emptied out as people sought shelter in their homes. Early the next morning, many rushed to co-ops and grocery stores to buy needed supplies.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat





Local

Philippine Embassy repatriates 254 Filipinos by chartered flight to Manila



By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: In an effort to prevent the spread of coronavirus in Kuwait, the Talha Deportation Center, Public Authority for Manpower (PAM) and the Philippine Embassy shelters sent home 254 Filipinos who were detained for absconding or other criminal offenses and faced deportation. Among the deported Filipino workers were 16 male spa workers who were caught allegedly cross-dressing at some male massage centers in Kuwait.

The deportees were seen off by Philippine Embassy officials at Kuwait International Airport, headed by Charge d'Affaires and Vice Consul Charleson Hermosura. All commercial flights from Kuwait remain suspended except for special flights arranged in advance by the government. The group of repatriated Filipinos departed from Kuwait International Airport's Terminal 4 at 1:30 pm on Wednesday via Kuwait Airways Flight 417, which arrived at Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport at 4 am yesterday.

"This effort is by the Kuwaiti government to help clear Talha in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus in Kuwait. The 254 people are from various shelters in Kuwait, but mostly from Talha Deportation Center - 151 in total; the rest are from the embassy shelter and PAM. This is a record number when it comes to the number of Filipinos repatriated on one flight from Kuwait," Hermosura explained. He thanked HH the Amir and the Kuwaiti government for shouldering the cost of repatriation. "In just two days, we managed to process the documents of these repatriated people so

we could send them home this afternoon," he added.

Repatriated housemaid Editha Belotendos, a 58-year-old single woman from Zamboanga, headed home to her family in a wheelchair. "I worked with my employers since 2010. They were good people, but in January 2020, I suffered a mild stroke which paralyzed half my body. I cannot walk and my leg and arm are numb, so of course I cannot work. My employer decided to send me home, and coordinated with the Philippine Embassy after a month

of recuperation at the hospital. I am sad to leave my very good employers, but this is life. They have given me enough money to recuperate at home and said if I get better, I can call them so they can issue a visa for me to come back. Hopefully I will be able to recover soon," she said.

Mayla Payud, 43, a native of Ormoc City, went home without getting justice in a case filed against her employer in February. "I was torn between the fact that I want to get justice, and at the same time I want to go home to my family amidst the coronavirus worries. I finally decided to go back home because they are all leaving (refer-

ring to her friends at the embassy shelter). I don't know when my case will end - it's really frustrating, but this is it. I am going home without anything," the sobbing housemaid said.

Payud's ordeal had gone viral on Facebook in early February, when she posted photos of her bloodied face after she was allegedly hit on the nose with a mobile phone by her male sponsor. The images drew the attention of the Philippine Embassy, which ordered her agency in Kuwait to report the matter to the authori-

housemaid, but I was wrong," she told Kuwait Times.

Another deportee was Naisa Regio from Quezon province. The 32-year-old stayed with her employer for only three months. "I begged them to send me home, but they sent me instead to my agency and then to the Philippine Embassy. I realized that I would probably die here if I didn't go home; I passed out several times while working at their home in the past three months, so I told them to send me home as I am no longer capable of working. Thank God I will be home tomorrow," she said.

Philippine Vice Consul Adrian Baccay said PAM and Talha Deportation Center have "zero" Filipinos now. "We still have a few remaining in the Philippine Embassy shelter - these are people with assistance to nationals unit (ATNU) cases pending in local courts here. As much as we want them to be on this special flight, we cannot send them because some of their cases have travel bans and some cases are almost over and we do not want to jeopardize their long stay in Kuwait since the decision of the court can come anytime," he said.

In the new standard contract agreement reached between Kuwait and the Philippines, the Philippine Embassy will be prevented from harboring Filipino domestic helpers at its premises. "The problem is we cannot prevent our nationals from seeking help from the embassy if the need arises. This is exactly the reason why we are here, to assist our fellow citizens if they are in trouble," an embassy official told Kuwait Times on the condition of anonymity when asked about this issue.

This effort is by the Kuwaiti government to help clear Talha in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus in Kuwait

Local

Stay at home



IN MY VIEW

By Nawara Fattahova

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People of Kuwait are living a new lifestyle with the curfew. It's hard for most people, but we had to adapt to it, hoping it won't last long. The situation in general changed in Kuwait since the first week of this month, after the government suspended schools and closed the public sector, then later shuttered mosques and malls, stopped public transportation and closed beaches and parks. At that time, people were still able to get out of the house in the evening without gathering.

But now the streets are empty, as almost everything is closed except essential activities. The panicking and frenzied overbuying of foodstuff occurred on the day when authorities announced suspending work in the public sector. The next day co-ops and supermarkets were back to normal, and people could buy stuff at any time, as co-ops started working 24/7. But after the announcement of the partial curfew, the panic returned. It's much worse now, as it wasn't limited to one day - it's going on every day due to the shorter working hours.

Also, the curfew psychically affected people, and streets are visibly much more crowded during the daytime. Most co-ops and supermarkets witness queues due to the limit on people allowed to be inside at the same time (no more than 50 people). The same applies to banks, as there is only one branch of each bank operating in each governorate, with a limit of five persons at a time.

The first day after announcing the curfew, Shuwaikh was crazy. Airport Road between Shuwaikh and Khaldiya was crowded the same as during Ramadan. For some reason, everyone rushed to this area, and left at around 3:00 pm. New measures are now in practice. Entering the co-ops is only possible after checking the temperature of the customer and scanning their civil ID card. Most co-ops close at 3:30 pm, although the government has allowed them to operate till 4:00 pm. Some supermarkets are even closing at 3:00 pm.

As all people are staying at home, the load on the Internet is very high, and many users have complained of slow Internet, especially in crowded areas. After the three telecommunication companies announced free 5 GB Internet daily and unlimited calls for a month, everybody is using the Internet and social media is flooded with videos and jokes. Many have remarked on a new happening that's uncommon in Kuwaiti society - men cooking. Videos and jokes spread about this new activity of men "imprisoned" in their houses.

We all pray to God to end this hard period and that life gets back to normal soon. We should also not forget to appreciate that we are forced to stay at home and not elsewhere, remembering all refugees who have no home at all.

Pray at home



IN MY VIEW

By Adellatif Sharaa

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Today will be the second Friday when Muslims in Kuwait will not pray en masse in mosques. The closures of the mosque are part of the government's efforts to limit gatherings and stop the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. I used to waking up early, waiting for the azan to go the mosque and meet friends and brothers in worship. After this my long day starts.

Now it is totally different. During the call for prayer, the muezzin adds a new, unfamiliar sentence: "Pray at home!" The first time I heard this, I said to myself, "Oh, my God, what happened!" I cannot stay away from the mosque - I have to be there at least once a day. But things have slowly started to fall into place and I understand why the mosques are closed and why it's necessary to avoid gatherings to protect us all.

My feelings led me to search for a precedent for such a decision, as all what I am familiar with is that worshippers can combine noon and evening prayers, and sunset and night prayers in case of severe weather, war, etc in mosques. Then my senses told me to behave - this enemy is unseen. But there are ways you can keep it away from you, this includes avoiding crowds, social distancing, all forms of hygiene, etc. As prayers in mosques bring large numbers together in extremely close proximity, it makes sense to stay away from crowds.

Still, as I was sitting home reading, I wanted to find anything that goes back to the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and see if something like this took place. I found this happened not only during a disease outbreak, but even during bad weather. It is really comforting to know this. The coronavirus does not know borders, religions, geographic locations or anything. Its target is humanity - it has hit royalty and commoners alike, which



forced the World Health Organization (WHO) after many days of denial to utter the word pandemic.

Many countries, Muslim and otherwise, have taken several measures related to religious rituals in order to control COVID-19. Many of my friends, including myself, felt a little despondent at the start, but things are settling down, and one has to come to terms with the situation, with hope that this crisis will end soon. I am a strong believer that there is no disease that doesn't have a cure, but we have to look for it, and this is why scientists exist and they are hard at work.



KUWAIT: File images show the Nahedh Mosque and Saad Mosque (top) in Kuwait City. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Local

611 expatriates return to their home countries from Kuwait

306 citizens return, quarantined at resorts secured by National Guard



KUWAIT: 611 expatriates returned to their home countries from Kuwait. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: The interior ministry said 306 citizens returned home yesterday as part of a plan to bring back nationals from abroad due to spread of coronavirus, while 611 expatriates and Gulf nationals left for their home countries. Three planes carrying a total of 306 Kuwaiti citizens coming from Lebanon, Egypt and Bahrain - three nations with coronavirus cases - arrived at Kuwait International Airport on Wednesday, as part of the first phase of a plan

due to end on Sunday, March 29, the ministry said in a statement.

It added 195 Kuwaitis came from Egypt, 74 from Lebanon and 37 from Bahrain. They were all tested at airport facilities specially erected for this purpose and then taken to compulsory quarantine. The ministry meanwhile said 611 non-Kuwaitis left for their home countries after they completed preventive measures. It said 342 Egyptians, 254 Filipinos and 15 Bahraini nation-



Kuwaiti returnees are quarantined in resorts secured by the National Guard.

als were onboard planes that took them back to their countries.

The squad of the National Guard securing quarantine sites received on Wednesday the citizens who were flown back from Lebanon, Egypt and Bahrain. The Guard said in a statement that the repatriated citizens were quarantined at Joan and Seashell resorts and will remain at the secured locations to ensure they are free of the coronavirus. A number of senior officers were

present upon arrival of the returned citizens.

Two Kuwait Airways planes were to bring citizens from Germany and Britain yesterday, part of a government plan to bring nationals from countries infected with the coronavirus, Directorate General for Civil Aviation (DGCA) said Wednesday. It added in a statement a plane was scheduled to arrive from Frankfurt at 5:00 pm, and another from London at around 8:05 pm. — KUNA

Citizens' repatriation depends on success of anti-virus measures: FM

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said on Wednesday the success of repatriating citizens from abroad depends on the effectiveness of national efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Speaking at a press conference held at Seif Palace on the government's efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19, Sheikh Ahmad said the first phase of repatriation took place with citizens being brought back from Egypt, Lebanon and Bahrain. Commenting on the process of repatriation, he indicated that countries where Kuwaitis are situated were divided by three criteria - including countries where the disease is out of control such as Italy and Spain, nations where the disease is increasingly spreading such as the UK and Egypt, and finally GCC countries. The success of repatriation depends on how well the national plan to counter coronavirus is working, reaffirmed Sheikh Ahmad, who urged the people of the country to band together in order to bring Kuwaitis back home.

He indicated that Kuwaiti diplomatic missions are working throughout the day and night to bring Kuwaitis back. During the press conference, the foreign minister displayed a graph of where Kuwaitis were located throughout the world, stressing that their return will be conducted in a manner that is appropriate and in line with what developments are oc-

curing at any given time. The national carrier Kuwait Airways and Kuwaiti airline Jazeera will be the main transporters of repatriated nationals situated in some 11 countries, Sheikh Ahmad said.

HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is keen on the return of Kuwaiti nationals, and also at the same time, adamant on making sure that Kuwaiti missions abroad attend to the needs of citizens wherever they are. He implored the increasing number of Kuwaitis seeking assistance abroad to contact the country's diplomatic missions, providing them with necessary data and information to facilitate their return home. The foreign minister also encouraged Kuwaiti citizens to follow rules and regulations of their respective host nations, saying that it was paramount to aid the global fight against the coronavirus. Sheikh Ahmad took the opportunity at the end of the conference to thank Jordan for providing provisions to Kuwaitis during the curfew imposed in the kingdom. — KUNA



Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah



KUWAIT: Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah meets Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Chief of the National Security Bureau Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah on Wednesday. — KUNA

Defense minister discusses measures against coronavirus

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on Wednesday held discussions with Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Chief of the National Security Bureau Sheikh Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah coordination with state authorities partaking in special measures to face the novel coronavirus.

The army said in a statement that the officials, during the meeting held at the Cabinet Secretariat General, addressed mechanisms related to the measures. The meeting was attended by the Kuwaiti Army Chief of Staff Lt Gen Mohammed Al-Kheder, Interior Undersecretary Maj Gen Essam Al-Naham, officials of the ministries of defense, foreign and internal affairs.—KUNA

Local

Minister says decision soon on unpaid private sector wages

Govt could ask to delay 10% transfer to future generations fund

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Minister of Social Affairs Mariam Al-Aqeel said yesterday she is currently considering how to deal with private sector employers who have not paid their staff. "We will not take long to issue a decision on how to deal with this wrong situation, because how can employees meet their financial commitments if they don't get paid," the minister said on Kuwait TV. The issue concerns thousands of expatriate workers who make up the overwhelming majority of the private sector workforce.

The ministry has the power to force employers to pay wages and can use the guarantee

money deposited with the ministry to pay unpaid wages. Businesses in Kuwait as well as all over the world have been hit hard by the shut-downs and curfews due to the coronavirus, rendering many small businesses helpless in coping with the difficult financial situation. Aqeel said cooperative societies have been performing well during the current crisis and warned violators will be penalized.

Meanwhile, government spokesman Tareq Al-Mazrem said yesterday that the government has not discussed imposing a total round-the-clock curfew and the issue has not been proposed. But he added that imposing a total curfew remains an issue in the hands of the health au-

thorities.

The health ministry meanwhile reported 13 new coronavirus cases yesterday, raising the number to 208, while announcing that six more cases have recovered, bringing the total to 49. Health Ministry spokesman Abdullah Al-Sanad said that of the 159 cases receiving treatment, seven are in the intensive care unit, of whom two are in critical condition. More than 800 people have so far been discharged from quarantines.

Flights repatriating Kuwaitis continued yesterday with two flights from Britain and Germany, while Kuwait Airways announced plans to operate a flight to New York tomorrow. Special flights repatriated hundreds of Kuwaitis from

Lebanon, Egypt and Bahrain on Tuesday and the health ministry admitted that some of them tested positive for coronavirus. All repatriated citizens are placed in quarantines for 14 days.

Parliamentary sources said yesterday that the government is expected to request the Assembly to delay the 10 percent mandatory transfer from revenues to the future generations fund. This would amount to around KD 1 billion. The rare request requires approvals from the National Assembly and a decision by the government. By law, the government must transfer 10 percent of public revenues, regardless of deficit or surplus, to the future generations fund, which has assets of around \$600 billion invested mostly abroad.

13 new cases of coronavirus in Kuwait



Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad

KUWAIT: Kuwait confirmed 13 new coronavirus cases during the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 208, said the health ministry. During a press conference, the ministry's spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said six cases are of citizens who recently arrived from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, France and one case still under investigation. The seven other cases are of people who were in contact with previously infected patients.

Sanad revealed that out of the 208 cases, 49 have recovered and 159 are still receiving treatment. He indicated seven cases are in the ICU. Some 853 individuals have finished the quarantine period, he affirmed. The ministry of health urged citizens and residents to abide by all the decisions and recommendations issued by authorities.

Government urges people to ignore rumors

KUWAIT: The government on Wednesday urged people of the country to disregard rumors and fabricated video clips amid the current crisis emanating from the novel coronavirus outbreak. Tareq Al-Merzem, the government spokesperson, speaking at a news conference at Seif Palace, said spreading of rumors and unfounded

reports has intensified over the past 48 hours. "Help us to stop the dissemination of the rumors...along with fabricated video clips promoting wrong information...do not forward these erroneous materials," said the official spokesman.

Asked how authorities will secure delivery of necessities to the people in case a total curfew is enforced, he indicated that the government emergency team is still discussing the matter with representatives of cooperative societies and supermarkets to find a delivery mechanism. Merzem called on the people of Kuwait, in case of a full lockdown, to abstain from excessive shopping and consumption of food and other necessary goods "until the situation improves". —KUNA

14 violating stores closed

KUWAIT: The ministry of commerce and industry announced yesterday the closure of 14 commercial stores that did not abide by the law

and precautionary measures to combat the spread of coronavirus. In a statement, the ministry said that its inspection teams monitored 238 cooperative societies, popular markets, commercial stores and standalone vegetable shops to determine the extent of their commitment to new regulations and maintain stability of prices.

The ministry noted that inspection teams

Kuwait leads in sequencing virus genome

KUWAIT: Kuwait is a leader in the Gulf and Middle East in sequencing the genome of coronavirus, named by the World Health Organization as SARS CoV-2. Dasman Diabetes Institute (DDI) recently sequenced the genetic makeup of four samples of the

coronavirus, DDI's Director General Dr Qais Al-Duwairi told KUNA. The samples were taken from cases coming from abroad, rather than from Kuwait, he said. The virus has genetic mutation abilities, making it more serious than other viruses, he said, adding that the technique was conducted to have a greater understanding of the virus and answer relevant scientific questions. Information and data coming from all countries show that the virus has slight mutations, but strikingly, studies carried out by Kuwaiti researchers proved that the strains of viruses in Kuwait are, to a large extent, similar to those found in the



Tareq Al-Merzem

also monitored 38 catering branches, in addition to eight automated bakeries that belong to Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company. The statement added that its emergency center had received 422 complaints via hotline 135, in addition to renewing 204 ration cards. The ministry underlined the importance of adhering to laws due to the exceptional circumstances that the country is going through. — KUNA

Chinese city of Wuhan and Germany, Duwairi remarked.

Researchers from DDI and other several countries strongly believe that this variable virus strain in Europe is more fatal, the Kuwaiti doctor said. Furthermore, the institute plans to study the novel coronavirus, in collaboration and with the effective backing of the ministry of health to fight this pandemic, Duwairi noted. The DDI was established in 2006 mainly to combat the prevalence of diabetes in Kuwait through focused diabetes research, integrated prevention, training and education. — KUNA



'You may not kiss the bride'

Prince Charles tests positive for coronavirus

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GRASSOBBIO: A pallbearer takes a picture of a coffin for the relatives of a deceased person at the cemetery of Grassobbio in the province of Bergamo, as they could not attend the ceremony because they are in quarantine as a result of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus. — AFP

Coronavirus death toll tops 21,000

World leaders to hold crisis talks

MADRID: World leaders are to hold online crisis talks yesterday on the coronavirus pandemic that has forced three billion people into lockdown and claimed more than 21,000 lives. With the disease tearing around the globe at a terrifying pace, warnings are multiplying over its economic consequences, with experts saying it could cause more damage than the Great Depression.

And amid squabbling between the leaders of China and the US over who is to blame, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called for the world to act together to halt the menace. "COVID-19 is threatening the whole of humanity—and the whole of humanity must fight back," Guterres said, launching an appeal for \$2 billion to help the world's poor.

"Global action and solidarity are crucial," he said. "Individual country responses are not going to be enough." The death toll from the virus, which emerged in China late last year, continued to grow, with the US becoming the sixth country to hit four figures. At least 1,041 people are now known to have died in the United States, with almost 70,000 confirmed infections, a tally by Johns Hopkins University showed, while globally the number of infections is closing in on half a million.

Gun rush

The rocketing infection rate in the US has sparked a rush to buy weapons, gun store owners told AFP, with customers panicking about social breakdown. "A lot of people are buying shotguns, handguns, AR-15 (semi-automatic rifles), everything," said Tiffany Teasdale, who sells guns in Washington state. "A lot of people are



Disease tearing around the globe at terrifying pace

scared that someone is going to break into their home... to steal cash, their toilet paper, their bottled water, their food."

Around half of the US population is under lockdown, but President Donald Trump said he would decide soon whether unaffected parts of the country can get back to work. "We want to get our country going again," Trump said. "I'm not going to do anything rash or hastily. "By

Easter we'll have a recommendation and maybe before Easter," said Trump, who had been touting a strong US economy as he faces an election in November.

The White House, which has been criticized for its lacklustre response to the mushrooming crisis, has repeatedly lashed out at Beijing over the disease. On Wednesday Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the Group of Seven powers were united against China's "disinformation" campaign. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman infuriated Washington by suggesting on Twitter that US troops brought the virus to Wuhan, the metropolis where it was first detected late last year.

'Crazy talk'

Scientists believe the new coronavirus came from a market that butchered exotic animals. "Every one of the nations that were at that meeting this morning was deeply aware of the disinformation campaign that the Chinese Communist Party is engaged in to try and deflect from what has really taken place," Pompeo told reporters. China "has been and continues to be engaged in" a campaign through social media that has included conspiracy theories of US involvement.

"This is crazy talk," he said. But any notion of unity after the videoconference among the G7,

which also includes Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan, was dashed by the lack of a joint statement—often a formality at such gatherings. Reports suggested the statement was scuttled by Pompeo's insistence that it use the term "Wuhan virus"—a formulation frowned upon by medical professionals who say it is stigmatising.

Economists say the coronavirus, and the lockdown that has seen three billion people told to stay indoors, could cause the most violent recession in recent history. "The G20 economies will experience an unprecedented shock in the first half of this year and will contract in 2020 as a whole," rating agency Moody's said. Unemployment rates are expected to soar, particularly in countries where levels have recently been at historic lows, such as Britain and the US.

James Bullard, president of the St Louis Federal Reserve, has predicted unprecedented unemployment rates of 30 percent, while Europe can also expect to suffer. "We think the unemployment rate in the eurozone will surge to about 12 percent by the end of June, giving up seven years' worth of gains in a matter of months," said David Oxley of London-based Capital Economics. Leaders of the G20 major economies will hold a virtual huddle later in the shadow of such dire predictions. — AFP

International

Saudi tightens restrictions; travelers stranded in UAE

Second death in Saudi Arabia, total 900 infections

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia reported its second coronavirus death and tightened a nationwide curfew on Wednesday, barring travel in and out of Riyadh, the capital, and the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, as well as movement between all provinces. The orders, approved by King Salman and published by state media, also brought forward the start of a curfew in the three cities to 3 pm from 7 pm.

Saudi Arabia introduced the curfew on Monday, initially for 21 days, after registering a jump in infections. Its second fatality was a 46-year-old foreign resident of Makkah, among 133 new cases that took Saudi Arabia's total to 900. Across the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, the tally rose to 2,472 with seven deaths, as the United Arab Emirates registered 85 new infections, Oman 15 and Kuwait four.

Saudi Arabia has halted international flights as well as suspending visas for the year-round Umrah pilgrimage and closing mosques, schools, malls and restaurants. The restrictions have al-

tered the rhythm of daily life in the country of some 30 million, where late-night gatherings at coffee shops or private homes are common.

Turkish resident Nasif Erisik, who plays cards most nights with friends at one of their homes, said the group had resorted to online gaming to keep in touch. "Corona has ... changed our habits and everything in our lives," Erisik said. The authorities say those who violate restrictions will be fined or jailed. The Interior Ministry on Wednesday reported high compliance.



Entry, exit banned from Riyadh, Madinah and Makkah

Quarantine breached

In the UAE, the region's tourism, business and transit hub, 64 people were facing legal action for not obeying a 14-day home quarantine order after coming into contact

with people confirmed to be infected, the government tweeted.

The UAE said it closed all public transport from 8 pm yesterday to 6 am on Sunday as it disinfects all public facilities, state news agency WAM said. Movement of traffic and people would be re-



DUBAI: A herd of camel grazes the centre of Dubai where all the traditional camel races have stopped amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in Dubai. —AFP

stricted and people were urged to stay home unless they needed food, medicine or healthcare, or if they worked in vital sectors, it said. Hundreds of Europeans were stranded in the UAE after the Dubai and Abu Dhabi airports stopped flights on Tuesday night with little warning.

Oil engineer Jamie Richardson had been due to return to Britain on Wednesday for a new job.

"It's proper stressful," he said. "You have no idea what's going on." UAE authorities have urged people to stay home but have not announced an official curfew or suspended work. On Wednesday the business regulator in Dubai, one of the member-emirates, told private companies to implement remote working for 80% of staff through April 9. — Reuters

Yemen war: 5 years on, rebels stronger than ever

DUBAI: Five years after Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen's civil war, leading a military coalition to prop up the government which had been driven out of its capital, the Houthi rebels are only stronger, more resilient and gaining ground. The Iran-aligned insurgents' capabilities have developed in the past year, with attacks on strategic targets in Yemen and neighboring Saudi Arabia using sophisticated drones.

Experts say that pressure on the Saudis to reduce civilian casualties in air strikes, a drawdown by their coalition partner the United Arab Emirates' in mid-2019, and rifts within the government camp, have strengthened the rebels' resolve. The novel coronavirus sweeping the world could be a wild card in the conflict.

Saudi Arabia has reported hundreds of cases and imposed tough lockdown measures, while Yemen appears highly vulnerable even if its broken healthcare system has not yet registered any cases. But after military victories in recent months that have given them the upper hand, the sixth year



SANAA: Yemeni men chant slogans as they hold up Kalashnikov assault rifles during a tribal meeting in the Houthi rebel-held capital Sanaa, as tribesmen donate rations and funds to fighters loyal to the Houthis along the fronts. — AFP

of the conflict is likely to deliver more gains to the rebels, and more hardship to civilians who have endured the long war.

Who are the Houthis?

The Houthi tribal fighters belong to the Zaidi minority, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, that makes up a third of Yemen's Sunni-majority population. They rose up in the 1990s over alleged sectarian discrimination.

The movement is named after its late spiritual leader Badreddin Al-Houthi and his son Hussein, who was killed by Yemeni government forces in 2004. Between 2004 and 2010, the group—known as Ansarullah (Supporters of God)—fought six wars against Yemen's then-government and bat-

tled Saudi Arabia in 2009-2010 after storming across the border.

They also took part in protests that forced veteran ruler Ali Abdullah Saleh from office in 2012 but later formed an alliance with him before again falling out and killing him in 2017. The Houthi ouster of the government of Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi and takeover of the capital Sanaa set off the Saudi-led intervention in March 26, 2015. Since then, the coalition has not been able to defeat the insurgents, who have none of their adversaries' high tech firepower but are well-trained, tenacious and accustomed to battling in Yemen's harsh and mountainous terrain. — AFP

'Who will feed us?' Viral shutdown hits N Africa's workers

RABAT: In Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, workers in informal jobs fear not only the novel coronavirus, but how they will survive emergency measures that have cut off their livelihoods. "We are stuck at home, with no work and no pay," said Hakim, a 30-year-old father who until last week worked in a bar-restaurant in the Moroccan capital Rabat. His boss told employees he wouldn't pay them for the month of March, but Hakim said they can't do anything about it. Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, like many other countries worldwide, have announced strict measures to confront the COVID-19 pandemic.

Police and soldiers patrol deserted roads, cafes and restaurants have closed, street vendors have disappeared and small businesses have pulled down their shutters. The three North African countries have a combined population of around 90 million. Among them are millions working in informal, undeclared or precarious employment lacking social protections, from day laborers to street vendors, craftspeople to cleaners, caretakers to construction workers.

"There are no more clients," said Mohamed, a self-employed plumber and father of three in a working-class neighborhood of Rabat. "At the same time, the price of vegetables has soared." The situation is particularly critical in Morocco, where informal employment is estimated at almost 80 percent of the workforce. That compares to 63 percent in Algeria and almost 59 percent in Tunisia, according to figures published in 2018 by the International Labor Organization. — AFP

International

Jerusalem's Church of Holy Sepulchre shuts

Israel ups anti-coronavirus measures

JERUSALEM: Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, believed by Christians to house Christ's tomb, was shut Wednesday, as Israel tightened movement restrictions and the Palestinians announced their first novel coronavirus death. The church, located in Jerusalem's Old City, was closed shortly after 5:00 pm, as Israel imposed a series of new measures meant to curb the spread of the virus, including shutting down places of worship.

"We have been informed of the closure. Our understanding is that it is for one week. We hope (the church) will reopen as soon as possible," said Wadie Abunassar, a spokesperson for the local clergy. "We hope to reopen by

Easter," he said. The shuttering of the church to the public comes a short time ahead of Easter celebrations to be held this year on the second weekend of April, and days after Muslim authorities closed the nearby Al-Aqsa mosque compound, Islam's third holiest site.

The new restrictions to curb the virus spread

in Israel prohibited residents from leaving their homes except to buy essentials such as food and medicine, to seek medical treatment or in some cases, for work. The measures were announced in a statement from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office Wednesday and will be in place for seven days. "Violating the prohibitions will constitute a criminal offense" the statement said, noting that police were tasked with enforcing the orders.

Palestinians record first virus death

stricter measures. "In two weeks, we are liable to find ourselves with thousands of patients, many of whom will be in danger of death," he said in a televised address. "If we do not see an immediate improvement in the trend, there will be no alternative but to impose a complete lockdown."

"Individuals aged 60 and over, especially the elderly and at-risk groups, must remain at home and avoid putting themselves at risk by going out," it added. Netanyahu warned on Wednesday night that the situation could worsen quickly and require



JERUSALEM: Adeb Joudé, the custodian in charge of the ancient key to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, closes the entrance gate to the church due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, in Jerusalem's Old City. — AFP

The number of Israelis who have tested positive for the COVID-19 disease reached 2,369 on Wednesday evening and five people have died in recent days after contracting the virus. Palestinian authorities in the occupied West Bank re-

ported the territory's first death from the virus on Wednesday, with 60 cases recorded so far. The Palestinian Authority on Sunday banned all non-essential movements for 14 days to curb the spread of the disease. — AFP

Spain overtakes China with 3,434 virus deaths

MADRID: Spain's coronavirus death toll overtook that of China on Wednesday, rising to 3,434 after another 738 people died as Madrid announced a multi-million-euro deal with Beijing for critical supplies. The spike in fatalities means that across the globe, only Italy—with 7,503 deaths—now has a higher death toll than Spain. In China, where the virus emerged late last year, the COVID-19 epidemic has claimed 3,281 lives.

The latest figures were announced as Spain entered the 11th day of an unprecedented lockdown to try and rein in the deadly coronavirus outbreak that has now infected 47,610 people, the health ministry said. Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo, who has been in hospital since Monday, has tested positive for the virus and is improving, the government said.

Two other ministers in Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's government are infected. The surge in numbers has brought the medical system to the brink of collapse, with Spain struggling with a lack of medical supplies for testing, treatment and the protection of frontline workers, and a growing number of cases among healthcare personnel with more than 5,400 infected. To address the shortages, Health Minister Salvador Illa said the government had inked a major deal with China. — AFP

Nigeria prepares for virus lockdown and mass burials

ABUJA: The Nigerian Army is preparing to forcibly transfer the sick to hospital and enforce curbs on movement to try to shield the country from the coronavirus, and is leasing equipment for "possible mass burial", according to an army memo seen by Reuters. The memo from Army headquarters also outlines plans to protect government food storage from looters as Africa's most populous nation braces for the illness to spread further in the country.

"Following the rise and continuous spread in cases of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Nigeria, the (Chief of Army Staff) has deemed it necessary for all to take protective measures to ensure the safety of (army) personnel and their families," the memo said. There are currently 46 confirmed cases in Nigeria, and one death, but the infection has hit the top levels of society, infecting President Muhammadu Buhari's chief of staff. With a population of 200 million, 20 million of whom are packed into the commercial



LAGOS: A Fitness club engages in physical exercises but dispersed upon the arrival of Lagos Task Force team against social gatherings at Broad Street in Lagos, Nigeria, the most populated country in Africa has tightened restrictions in three states on places of worship, airports and bars to try and protect its population against the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

capital of Lagos, many fear the virus could spread quickly without containment.

The memo said the army was suspending leave passes for all personnel and called for them to be on "maximum security alert and be ready for deployment." The virus has swept across the world, killing thousands and forcing millions into quarantine. Several nations have activated armed forces to help combat it. South Africa deployed its army to enforce a 21-day lockdown that begins this week, and US President Donald Trump activated the

National Guard in New York, California and Washington.

The US, French and Moroccan armies have set up field hospitals, and Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the army to carry out drills to increase its readiness. Nigerian Finance Minister Zainab Ahmed told the heads of parliament's two houses that the government would release 6.5 billion naira (\$18 million) to the National Centre for Disease Control to help fight the virus, the Senate president's office said in a statement. — Reuters

International

Turkey charges 20 Saudis over Khashoggi's murder

Saudi insider-turned-critic cut into pieces

ISTANBUL: Turkish prosecutors have charged 20 suspects over the brutal 2018 murder of Riyadh critic Jamal Khashoggi. Prosecutors accuse Saudi Arabia's deputy intelligence chief Ahmed Al-Assiri and the royal court's media tsar Saud Al-Qahtani of leading the operation against Khashoggi and giving orders to a Saudi hit team. Khashoggi, 59, a commentator who wrote for The Washington Post, was killed after he entered the Saudi consulate on October 2, 2018, to obtain paperwork for his wedding to Turkish fiancée Hatice Cengiz.

The Saudi insider-turned-critic was strangled and his body cut into pieces by a 15-man Saudi squad inside the consulate, according to Turkish officials. His remains have never been found despite repeated calls by Turkey for the Saudis to cooperate. Riyadh insists he was killed in a "rogue" operation.

Cengiz on Wednesday welcomed the charges, describing the prosecutor's decision as a "good step towards justice". She urged the US National Director of Intelligence to publish a report on who is responsible for the murder, and called on Washington to carry out "an international investigation". "Not holding Jamal's real killers accountable gives those officials a green light to continue their oppression of their people (and) sends the wrong message to the world that the wealthy and powerful are above the law."

'Monstrous killing'

Turkey carried out its own investigation after being unhappy with Saudi Arabia's explanations. The Istanbul prosecutor's office said in a statement that Assiri and Qahtani were charged with "instigating the deliberate and monstrous killing, causing torment". The murder caused relations between Ankara and Riyadh - longstanding rivals - to worsen. Saudis, who enjoy investing and holidaying in Turkey, were urged to boycott the country last year.

Turkey meanwhile is a key backer of Qatar, especially after a Riyadh-led economic blockade began against the Gulf state in 2017, and is accused of supporting groups including the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia views the Brotherhood as an existential threat. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has vowed Ankara will not give up the case. "This happened in my country, how am I not going to follow up on that? Of course I'm going to follow up. This is our responsibility," Erdogan told Fox News last year.

'Insufficient evidence'

Eighteen other suspects-including intelligence operative Maher Mutreb, forensic expert Salah Al-Tubaigy and Fahad Al-Balawi, a member of the Saudi royal guard-were also charged with "deliberately and monstrously killing, causing torment". They face life in jail if con-



ISTANBUL: This file video grab shows Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi (right) arriving at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul. —AFP

victed. Mutreb, Tubaigy and Balawi had been among 11 people on trial in Riyadh. Western officials said many of those accused defended themselves by saying they were carrying out Assiri's orders, describing him as the operation's ringleader.

Five unnamed people were sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia in December while three others were handed jail terms totaling 24 years

over the killing. Qahtani had been investigated but he was not charged by the Saudi authorities because of "insufficient evidence" while Assiri was charged but eventually acquitted on the same grounds. The Turkish prosecutor said a trial in absentia would be opened against the 20 suspects but did not give a date. The prosecutors have already issued arrest warrants for the suspects who are not in Turkey. —AFP

Prince Charles tests positive for coronavirus

LONDON: Prince Charles, the eldest son and heir to Queen Elizabeth II, is showing mild symptoms of the new coronavirus and is self-isolating in Scotland, his office said on Wednesday, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson praised the country's response to tackling the outbreak. The 71-year-old Prince of Wales is staying on his mother's sprawling Balmoral estate in Scotland, but "otherwise remains in good health". His wife, Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, 72, tested negative, Clarence House said in a statement.

The disclosure about the future king, whose age puts him in the most-risk category for the disease, came as Britain said there were more than 8,000 cases of COVID-19 and 422 deaths as of Tuesday. The Foreign Office said its deputy head of mission at the British embassy in Budapest, Steven Dick, 37, had died after contracting the virus. And a 21-year-old woman with no apparent underlying health conditions also died, her family said, urging people to heed official advice.

The government on Monday ordered a three-week lockdown of the country to cut close-contact transmission, to slow the rate of infection and reduce the burden on health-care services. The elderly and most vulnerable, including those with underlying health issues, have been told to stay at home, and anyone displaying symptoms to self-isolate for seven days. Clarence House said doctors believe Charles



LONDON: In this file photo, Britain's Prince Charles, Prince of Wales sits with Britain's Queen Elizabeth II during the State Opening of Parliament in the Houses of Parliament. Prince Charles, the eldest son and heir to Queen Elizabeth II, has tested positive for the new coronavirus. —AFP

became contagious on March 13 - a day after last meeting his mother.

The 93-year-old queen has been staying with her 98-year-old husband Prince Philip at Windsor Castle, 640 miles south of Balmoral, since March 19. Given their age - and Prince Philip's stay in hospital at Christmas - the prince's diagnosis prompted questions about their potential exposure to the virus. But a Buckingham Palace spokeswoman said: "Her Majesty the Queen remains in good health. —AFP

Netanyahu's ally resigns as speaker of parliament

JERUSALEM: A right-wing ally of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stepped down as speaker of parliament on Wednesday in a blow to the embattled premier, the latest development in a months-long political crisis. Yuli Edelstein's resignation paved the way for Netanyahu's rival Benny Gantz, who is trying to form a government, to place an ally in the powerful post. That could spell new risks for the premier as he faces trial for alleged corruption. Lawmakers who oppose Netanyahu have pushed for a law blocking him from remaining prime minister while facing the charges, all of which he denies.

Edelstein, a member of Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, had refused to schedule a speakership vote until a new government was formed, resigning instead after the Supreme Court set a Wednesday deadline for the vote. "The High Court ruling constitutes a crude and arrogant intervention of the judiciary in the matters of the elected legislature," Edelstein said. "I won't allow Israel to descend into anarchy. I won't lend a hand to civil war," he said as the court's deadline approached. "I hereby resign from my position as Knesset speaker." His departure, however, would take effect only in 48 hours. That means he remains bound to call the vote on Wednesday in line with the Supreme Court order, according to attorney general Avichai Mandelblit. —AFP

International

'Delivering coffins non-stop': Virus stalks a nursing home

Death tally in nursing homes spike across France

PARIS: Outside a Paris retirement home on Wednesday, a director rushed out and told the man delivering a coffin to use a side entrance, away from prying eyes. The coffin, one of three brought the same morning, came hours after officials said 13 elderly residents had died in the home since March 11 and that more than 80 others were believed to have the coronavirus.

Most of the dead were aged over 90, an official at the regional health authority told Reuters. Authorities have not been able to establish the cause of death in most cases. "The deliveries are non-stop. There are going to be more on Monday," the delivery man said as he removed the casket's plastic cover.

The facility in Paris' 12th district is one of several care homes across France to be hit by the coronavirus outbreak. There have been large numbers of deaths too at retirement homes in Italy and Spain. Almost 1 million people reside in care homes in France. In the Paris region alone, the regional health authority says that 148 out of the 700 homes in its network have reported coronavirus cases and at least 61 residents have died.

The Rothschild Foundation home in Paris was

put on red alert on March 6 as the epidemic took hold. Staff were given stricter entry protocols, told to wear gloves and masks at all times, disinfect everything and urged to isolate suspected cases. "We knew it was coming. The first two people with symptoms were tested and then isolated, but once it was established that they had it, we stopped testing because it's then a cluster. You can't allow it to spread," said a health worker aware of the situation.

13 residents dead at one Paris facility



Since then all residents have been confined to their rooms where they are fed and washed. But while the number of new cases has slowed, the deaths continue. Executives at the home did not respond to Reuters phone calls seeking detailed information about

what was happening in the home, but in a brief exchange, one executive described the situation at the facility as very tough.

High mortality rate

France's official coronavirus death toll stands at some 1,100 people, but that does not include deaths outside hospitals. Fatalities in nursing homes have surged recently with dozens of deaths



PARIS: Photo shows a homeless person walking down the deserted Champs Elysees in Paris, during the strict lockdown in France to stop the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus. —AFP

reported across the country. "When you don't have enough staff and equipment and need to care for fragile people then it leads to a high mortality rate. When it enters into a nursing home, you are going to see 20% of residents die," said Thierry Amouroux, a nurse and representative at the National Union for Professional Nurses.

Senior care home representatives warned the

Health Minister in a letter seen by Reuters that workers in the homes needed 500,000 masks. At least 100,000 people could die if the situation was not brought under control, they wrote. Jerome Larche, an intensive care doctor in Montpellier, whose company also operates care homes, said it was critical to avoid mass contaminations. —Reuters

Artificial intelligence may be a pandemic lifesaver... one day

WASHINGTON: On December 30, researchers using artificial intelligence systems to comb through media and social platforms detected the spread of an unusual flu-like illness in Wuhan, China. It would be days before the World Health Organization released a risk assessment and a full month before the UN agency declared a global public health emergency for the novel coronavirus.

Could the AI systems have accelerated the process and limited, or even arrested, the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic? Clark Freifeld, a Northeastern University computer scientist working with the global disease surveillance platform HealthMap, one of the systems detecting the outbreak, said it remains an open question.

"We identified the early signals, but the reality is it's hard to tell when you have an unidentified respiratory illness if it's a really serious situation," said Freifeld. Dataminr, a real-time risk detection technology firm, said it delivered the earliest warning about COVID-19 on December 30 based on eyewitness accounts from inside Wuhan hospitals, pictures of the disinfection of the Wuhan seafood market where the virus originated and a warning by a Chinese doctor who later died from the virus himself. —AFP

Ex-FBI agent missing for 13 years died in Iran custody: Family

WASHINGTON: A former FBI agent who mysteriously vanished in 2007 died in Iranian custody, his family concluded Wednesday, saying US intelligence had made them give up 13 years of hope. President Donald Trump did not confirm Bob Levinson's death, saying that Iran had not communicated any news on the former agent, who would have turned 72 this month.

But Levinson's family said that it had learned that he was dead, although it gave no information on how or when. "We recently received information from US officials that has led both them and us to conclude that our wonderful husband and father died while in Iranian custody," the family said in a statement. "We don't even know when, or even if, his body would be returned to us. This is the very definition of cruelty." The family said Levinson died before the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit Iran hard and led authorities to release thousands of prisoners temporarily. Levinson is one of a number of Americans who have disappeared in arch-enemy Iran, but his case has been among the most perplexing, with his family until now insisting he was alive. The father of seven vanished in March 2007 in Kish, an island that has more lenient visa rules than the rest of Iran, and was said to have been investigating cigarette counterfeiting.

But The Washington Post reported in 2013 that Levinson, who had retired from the FBI, was working for the CIA and had gone on a rogue mission aimed at gathering intelligence on Iran. It said at the time that the CIA paid \$2.5 million to Levinson's wife Christine, accepting responsibility for his disappearance. His family on Wednesday accused Tehran of "repeatedly lying to the world" about Levinson and renewed criticism of the initial US response.

Officials initially did not classify Levinson as a hostage and have consistently denied he worked for the government. "Those who are responsible for what happened to Bob Levinson, including those in the US government who for many years repeatedly left him behind, will ultimately receive justice for what they have done," the family said. "We will spend the rest of our lives making sure of this, and the Iranian regime must know we will not be going away." The FBI Agents Association, which represents more than 14,000 active and former agents, said it would "not forget Bob and will support all efforts to bring to justice those responsible for this horrific crime."

Years of mystery

Iranian officials have repeatedly said they had no information about Levinson. In 2010, a videotape of a haggard, bearded Levinson emerged in which he wore an orange jumpsuit of the sort worn by prisoners being held indefinitely at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The footage raised speculation that he may have been held by extremists in Pakistan, but US officials later discounted the possibility.

Trump, who as a candidate had accused his predecessor Barack Obama of not doing enough for Levinson in negotiations with Iran, noted that the former agent had longstanding health problems. "I don't accept that he's dead," Trump told reporters when asked about the family's statement. "They haven't told us that he's dead, but a lot of people are thinking that that is the case," he said. Senator Bob Menendez, who employs one of Levinson's sons on his staff, sounded more definitive on his death and vowed to hold Iran accountable.

"To be clear, the Iranian regime is fully responsible for Bob Levinson's disappearance and his death," said Menendez, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, where Levinson lived, also called for the United States to "hold the evil regime accountable." Iran released four US citizens of Iranian descent in 2016 when it concluded a nuclear deal with Obama, but relations have sharply deteriorated under Trump, who withdrew from the accord and implemented sweeping sanctions. —AFP

International

'Apocalypse now': Airlines turn to cargo for revenue

US Senate bill would give airlines \$58 billion in aid

SYDNEY: Delta Air Lines Inc and Air New Zealand Ltd said they would offer cargo charter services on passenger planes to boost revenue as the US Senate unanimously passed a bill to give its carriers \$58 billion in aid, including payroll support. The passenger travel industry has been ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic, with Australia's Flight Centre Travel Group Ltd announcing plans to cut 6,000 travel agent roles globally, either temporarily or permanently.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA), which represents airlines, said it has written to the heads of governments of 18 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including India, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines for emergency support for carriers. "Travel restrictions and evaporating demand mean that, aside from cargo, there is almost no passenger business," IATA Director General Alexandre de Juniac said in a statement.

"For airlines, it's apocalypse now." Singapore Airlines Ltd yesterday went into a rare trading halt pending an announcement, days after it said it would ground almost its entire fleet and seek more financing as it grapples with the coronavirus pandemic. IATA estimates the COVID-19 crisis will reduce passenger demand in Asia-Pacific by 37% this year compared to 2019, with a revenue loss of \$88 billion.

Singapore, Australia and New Zealand are among the few countries in the region that have announced some financial relief for airlines, but it has not stopped carriers from putting staff on leave and

grounding planes. Virgin Australia plans to permanently cut more than 1,000 jobs among the 8,000 staff that have been stood down due to cuts to its flying schedule, chief executive Paul Scurrah said.

In a move unthinkable under normal conditions, Australia's competition regulator said it would allow Virgin, Qantas Airways Ltd and Regional Express Ltd to coordinate flight schedules and share revenue on 10 regional routes. The approval is conditional on the carriers charging fares no higher than those in place on Feb 1. "We hope that this temporary measure will also support airlines' ability to again compete with each other on these routes once the pandemic crisis has passed," Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Chairman Rod Sims said.

In the United States, United Airlines Holdings Inc unveiled more domestic capacity cuts, meaning its total, including international, will drop by around 68% in April. Alaska Air Group Inc said it would cut its schedule by 70% in April and May and had suspended its dividend, drawn down a \$400 million credit line and secured an additional \$425 million loan to help weather the crisis.

The US Senate on Wednesday evening passed an industry aid package, half in the form of grants to cover some 750,000 employees' paychecks. Companies receiving funds cannot lay off employees before Sept 30 or change collective bargaining agreements. The bill has restrictions on stock buybacks, dividends and executive pay, and allows the government to take equity, warrants or other compensation as part of the rescue package. The US



COPENHAGEN: Photo shows aircrafts of nordic airline company SAS parked on the tarmac at Copenhagen's Airport, as most of the flights have cancelled due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

House of Representatives is expected to vote to approve the measure today and President Donald Trump has promised to sign it into law.

In an effort to raise much-needed revenue and keep some planes in the air, Delta and Air New Zealand said they had joined the growing number of carriers offering cargo charters on passenger planes. Hawaiian Airlines said it had added more cargo-only turboprop flights between the state's islands. "We've shared these options with our global cargo customer base and are getting some strong interest from customers wanting to ship to and from Shanghai, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sydney and Melbourne," said Rick Nelson, Air New Zealand's general manager for cargo. About half of the world's air cargo normally

travels in the bellies of passenger planes rather than dedicated freighters, so the cancellation of passenger flights has led to a sharp reduction in cargo capacity. Roughly 1,800 planes had been grounded globally on Monday and Tuesday, according to aviation research firm Cirium.

IATA said red tape is holding up medical and other emergency supplies needed to help tackle the virus crisis. Examples include two shipments, each containing about five to 10 tons of medical supplies, bound for Latin America and currently held up in Dubai and India. Figures to be published next week will show global air freight traffic fell around 10% in February, putting it on course for a 15%-20% drop for the year as a whole, IATA said. — Reuters

Brazil's Bolsonaro sparks backlash for downplaying virus

BRASILIA: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro drew blistering criticism from the medical community and opponents Wednesday for downplaying the coronavirus pandemic, but renewed his attacks on containment measures to slow its spread. The far-right leader has repeatedly lashed out at restrictive measures to fight the virus, which he has called a "little flu" that caused an "overblown" reaction.

He triggered new outrage among critics with a national address Tuesday night condemning "scorched-earth" containment measures by local authorities, such as closing businesses and confining people in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's biggest cities. He said such measures risked wrecking the Brazilian economy, Latin America's largest.

His stance, which flies in the face of World Health Organization recommendations, drew a strongly worded letter of condemnation from a group of eight medical professional associations. They called Bolsonaro an "enemy of the people's

health" whose response to the crisis was "incoherent and criminal." "He denies the body of scientific evidence guiding the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, disdaining the serious and dedicated work by a national and global network of researchers and health technology professionals," it said.

Politicians of various stripes also attacked Bolsonaro, including center-right Senate president Davi Alcolumbre, who said Brazil "needs a serious, responsible leader who cares about the people's lives and health." Undeterred, Bolsonaro doubled down. "Companies aren't producing anything. They can't pay their employees... We are facing chaos," he told journalists outside the presidential residence in Brasilia. "We could end up with problems like people looting supermarkets... What do we need to do? Get people back to work. Protect the elderly, protect people with health problems, but that's it." — AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: A graffiti of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro wearing a face mask is seen on a wall while a delivery man rides a bike in downtown Rio de Janeiro during the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

International

Fake cures and rumors: Virus misinformation hits homes

Devastating impacts of a deluge of online virus misinformation

HONG KONG: From being duped into taking poisonous “cures”, to watching businesses crumble and avoiding life-saving medication, people are suffering devastating real-world impacts of a deluge of online virus misinformation. As the new coronavirus that has killed more than 20,000 people causes markets to crash and sets scientists scrambling for a solution, rumors and false claims are fuelling confusion and deepening the economic misery.

The effects can be tragic - in Iran, one of the hardest-hit countries, more than 210 people died from drinking toxic alcohol after claims circulated online that it could treat or ward off COVID-19, the official Irna news agency reported. Dangerous fake cures debunked by AFP include consuming volcanic ash and fighting infection with UV lamps or chlorine disinfectants, which health authorities say can harm the body if used incorrectly.

Another remedy that “kills the coronavirus”, according to misleading social media posts, is drinking silver particles in liquid, known as colloidal silver. “I am making colloidal silver now. I have asthma and does it really work... worried/stressed over virus. Does this help if I take a teaspoon a day. New to this...” said a post by a user named Michelle in a pub-

lic Facebook group, alongside a photo of a jar of water with a metal rod in it.

The side effects of taking colloidal silver can include a bluish-grey skin discoloration and poor absorption of some medicines including antibiotics, according to the US National Institutes of Health. But this has not put some people off. An Australian man who said he regularly buys the concoction told AFP it had “sold out in my town ... but before the virus, I could always get some”. Cocaine and bleach-like solutions are also among the risky fake cures touted online. “No, cocaine does NOT protect against #COVID-19,” the French government tweeted in response.

Businesses hit hard

As panic buying leaves supermarket shelves empty around the world, some Indian traders and farmers have had the opposite problem — people shunning their products due to false information. Retailers in Delhi told AFP they had stocked up on Chinese-made goods such as toy guns, wigs and other colourful accessories ahead of Holi festival earlier this month. But “misinformation about Chinese products - that they might transmit coronavirus - caused a

downfall in the sales of Holi goods. We witnessed a reduction in sales of around 40 percent compared to previous year”, said Vipin Nijhawan from the Toy Association of India. The World Health Organization has said the virus does not last long on inanimate surfaces, so it is unlikely imported goods would remain infectious even if contaminated.

Heart meds

The rapid spread of information online means that when scientists discuss as-yet unproven theories, anxious patients can take unnecessary risks. Confusion has been sparked by letters and theoretical papers published in scientific journals about whether some types of heart medication can raise the chance of developing a serious form of COVID-19.

This has prompted health authorities across Europe and America to advise heart patients - already more at-risk for the disease - to continue taking their drugs. Carolyn Thomas, who runs a blog for women living with heart disease, said dozens of her readers had contacted her for advice after seeing tweets warning about ACE inhibitors and angiotensin receptor blockers. “Until I get in to see my own cardiologist, I’m still taking my own drugs, even as I wonder if they

are increasing my own vulnerability to catching the virus,” Thomas, who is self-isolating at home in Canada said.

“I’m afraid to take them, yet I’m afraid to stop,” she said. Professor Garry Jennings, chief medical advisor for Australia’s Heart Foundation, said the theoretical papers were “based on a number of factors which are all disputed” and warned that if patients stopped taking their medication there could be an upshot in heart attacks and deaths. “In the absence of any other evidence that it’s actually happening, and with the knowledge that these drugs are beneficial... it’s not a good idea to stop,” he said.

And a man died in the US from taking a form of chloroquine - hailed by President Donald Trump as a potential “gift from God” remedy - after he took a form of the drug his wife had used to treat her pet fish. The woman told NBC News: “I saw it sitting on the back shelf and thought, ‘Hey, isn’t that the stuff they’re talking about on TV?’” Banner Health, a non-profit health care provider based in Phoenix, said on its website that “a man has died and his wife is under critical care after the couple, both in their 60s, ingested chloroquine phosphate, an additive commonly used at aquariums to clean fish tanks.”—AFP

UK ‘plague village’ offers a lesson for virus-hit country

EYAM: In the 17th century, residents in the remote English village of Eyam quarantined themselves to prevent the spread of bubonic plague. Most paid with their lives. Now their descendants and locals are outraged that a steady stream of visitors have ignored government warnings to stay at home to tackle the coronavirus outbreak. Last weekend, walkers were out in force in the spring sunshine in the Peak District National Park, and traipsed through the village, which is home to about 1,000 people. Local councilor Claire Raw said residents, a significant proportion of them elderly, were angry and urged people to leave.

“We need to protect our residential areas that do have higher-than-average proportions of older people,” she told AFP. “We all need to behave responsibly.” Because of the pandemic, which has so far claimed 335 lives across Britain, the museum that tells the story of the “plague village” has decided not to re-open after the winter break. Normally, it receives some 30,000 visitors each year. But more than half of its volunteers are aged over 70 - one of the most at-risk groups for the virus.

In 1665, the bubonic plague arrived in the

Derbyshire village of Eyam from London, nearly 150 miles (250 kilometres) further south, carried by fleas in fabrics ordered by a tailor. As dozens died, the rector of Eyam church, William Mompesson, with the help of his predecessor Thomas Stanley, convinced parishioners the only way to fight it was to shut off the village completely.

Neighboring communities helped out, leaving food on the edge of the village. Vinegar—the only known disinfectant at the time—was used to keep germs at bay. The current vicar of St Lawrence’s church, Reverend Mike Gilbert, is currently in self-isolation because his wife has shown symptoms of COVID-19. During the plague, worshippers gathered outside to pray, keeping their distance from one another. Now, the church is closed and services have moved online, while Gilbert has been posting videos on Facebook and speaking to parishioners via videoconferencing.

What happened in the past-centuries before modern medicine and science—was driving the current response locally, he said. “It does inspire others because we know that even though the death toll was terrible, most people did survive,” he explained. “They came out and life started again. So, we’re hopeful as well. “Our people here are no different to anywhere else. There’s worry and fear and also lots of love and support for people around. “So when we see that, we see the worst and the best of humankind.”

“All the things that they had decided to do were very efficient,” said Francine Clifford, a village historian. “It was successful. But they paid the price.” In 14 months, some 260 villagers died



EYAM: Graves of those who lost their lives in the 17th century Great Plague are seen in the village of Eyam in Derbyshire, northern England. — AFP

of plague—perhaps as much as a third of the population, which was estimated at between 350 and 800. But by November 1666, the disease had disappeared and containment prevented it from spreading further north. Joan Plant, 73, is descended from one of the 83 families that survived the plague. It was astonishing that history was repeating itself, she said.

But as the government in London imposes a three-week lockdown, with non-essential shops and services shut, and restrictions on crowds, people should look to the past for inspiration. “I think the lesson at this moment is to remember that they isolated themselves. Nobody went out.

Nobody came in,” she said. Current restrictions could be in place for weeks, if not months. Plant said people should be aware it is for the greater good.

“I know a lot of people died (in Eyam) and that’s really tragic and sad. But actually, it saved the communities around,” she added. “It didn’t go any further north in the country. One small village in the north of Derbyshire, 350 years ago, made a difference to everybody else so that it didn’t spread. “I think that’s the lesson we need to learn. The technique worked 350 years ago. If we take on board what we’re up to do and do as we’re told, then it will work again in 2020.”—AFP

International

Indians race for supplies as coronavirus lockdown bites

21-day lockdown empties normally traffic-choked roads

NEW DELHI: Anxious Indians raced for essentials yesterday as an unprecedented 21-day lockdown across the nation of 1.3 billion people all but emptied normally traffic-choked roads. Many shelves in the megacities of New Delhi and Mumbai were stripped bare of staples like lentils and rice as the world's second most populous country lurched into a shutdown aimed at slowing the spread of the new coronavirus.

"It's getting increasingly difficult to source produce," Mumbai vegetable seller Rafiq Ansari, 35, told AFP. "We are going to face major shortages in the days ahead. And at the same time prices are also going up - tomatoes have more than doubled in price," he said. In the polluted capital New Delhi, some buses still operated - with drivers only allowing the holders of government passes to board - but police and paramilitaries were stopping private vehicles.

At one checkpoint near the India Gate monument, masked officers turned away some government officials in chauffeur-driven cars. "Outrageous," one official was heard to shout through his car window. In Ghaziabad, outside Delhi, many people said they were scared by the new measures, and complained the rules of the lockdown were not clear - a situation not helped by newspapers not being delivered in many places.

Some said they had been harassed by police when they went to buy medicine. Under the order, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday, people could face up to two

years in jail and an unspecified financial penalty if they flout the rules. As panic buying began to grip the country in the hours after his televised speech, Modi took to Twitter to try to calm fears of shortages. "Essential commodities, medicines etc. would be available. Centre and various state governments will work in close coordination to ensure this," he said.

But on Wednesday, shopkeepers were fretting about keeping their stores open, complaining that suppliers were being barred from entering the cities. "I am getting milk, eggs and bread. But let's say on an average, I get 100 packets of bread, today I've only got 20," one Delhi shopkeeper who identified himself as Pradeep told AFP. "I'm giving it to people as and when they come. I'm not sure how long the existing stock is going to last," he said.

Street cleaner Ajay said he and his colleagues had been told to come to work every day. "But there is a shortage of staff. We live close by and we have our own vehicles. But those who stay in other bordering states are not able to come here. Transport is limited," he said. Brandishing a mask he had bought with his own money, he said he now feared that he could get ill. "There are many like me. Won't we get the virus? We don't have protective gear," he said.

Birdsong

From the normally bustling restaurant area of Mumbai to the western city of Ahmedabad, streets normally thronged with smoke-belching



NEW DELHI: This aerial photo shows a handful of vehicles driving on a deserted road during the first day of a 21-day government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in New Delhi. —AFP

traffic were almost silent. Birdsong could be heard in many neighborhoods, replacing the klaxons of buses and the endless beeping of motorized rickshaws that usually crowd some of the most densely packed places on Earth.

Even outside the cities the lockdown was biting, with AFP journalists reporting villagers in some rural areas had erected bamboo barri-

ades to prevent anyone coming or going. But among the frustration, there was support for Modi's move, which brings India into line with much of Europe, and large parts of the United States. A lockdown is "the only way the disease spread can be checked," Dharendra Kumar, a retired lawyer in the northern city of Lucknow said. "We had better support this lockdown." —AFP

Crisis brings robots to medical frontline

WASHINGTON: Robots are expected to demonstrate their value for "dirty and dangerous" medical tasks in the fight to quell the coronavirus pandemic, researchers said Wednesday. An editorial in *Science Robotics* noted that robots can help with telemedicine, decontamination, handling of hazardous waste and monitoring compliance with voluntary quarantines. "Historically, robots have been developed to take on dull, dirty and dangerous jobs," the researchers wrote. "As epidemics escalate, the potential roles of robotics are becoming increasingly clear." Some robots are already in use during the pandemic. Thai hospitals have deployed "ninja robots" to measure fevers and protect the health of overburdened medical workers, and robots in Denmark are using ultraviolet light to disinfect frequently touched surfaces. While robots have been used for years in disaster situations and some medical applications, the pandemic has highlighted the need to expand their role, according to the scientists. "Why are we still letting the frontline (health care) practitioners be exposed to the pathogen?" journal editor Guang-Zhong Yang, dean of the Institute of Medical Robotics at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, told reporters on a conference call.

"Robots are here for taking some of those risks away from our people." Robots should also be used for infection control, dealing with patients in intensive care and delivering medication and food, according to the editorial co-authored by researchers including Howie Choset



LOS ANGELES: A Postmate delivery robot is seen on its route to deliver food to customers in Los Angeles. In California, already under orders to stay home, Governor Gavin Newsom tightened the lockdown to shut parking lots at beaches and parks after tens of thousands flouted social distancing rules. —AFP

of Carnegie Mellon University and Marcia McNutt, president of the National Academy of Science. "COVID-19 may become the tipping point of how future organizations operate," the authors wrote.

"New generations of large, small, micro-, and swarm robots that are able to continuously work and clean (i.e., not only removing dust but also truly sanitizing/sterilizing all surfaces) could be developed." In terms of telepresence, the researcher wrote it was "a challenging area of development because social interactions require building and maintaining complex models of people, including their knowledge, beliefs, emotions." —AFP

Virus panic grips Rohingya camps in Bangladesh

KUTUPALONG: The sewage-soaked alleys and cramped canvas and bamboo shacks that house one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are a horrifying scene for experts watching the coronavirus pandemic creep closer. The wretched conditions in the camps, where most of the stateless Muslims arrived in 2017 to escape a Myanmar military clampdown across the nearby border, are fertile ground for any disease. The public in other countries are being told to keep two metres (six feet) apart. That is the width of most paths in Kutupalong, the world's biggest refugee camp with 600,000 Rohingya, that are clogged each day with people out on the daily hunt for food and fuel. Masks that have become a daily essential in much of the world are rarely seen. Sanitizer is unheard of.

Each shack is barely 10 square meters and they are overcrowded with up to 12 people. "You can hear your next-door neighbor breathing," said one aid worker. Social distancing is "virtually impossible" in the camps, Bangladesh head of Doctors Without Borders Paul Brockman said. —AFP

International

Social distancing in force at wedding in Indonesia

'You may not kiss the bride'

SURABAYA: Closed borders and social distancing rules to stem the coronavirus outbreak failed to stop one transnational couple in Indonesia from tying the knot on Wednesday, minus the customary kiss to seal the deal. Irra Chorina Octora, 29, and her Turkish partner Yavuz Ozdemir, 32, swapped vows at Al Akbar mosque in Surabaya, as friends and family—each sat two metres apart—looked on.

The couple both wore facemasks and kept their distance through the ceremony to comply with strict rules imposed by authorities, who have banned mass gatherings including weddings but allowed some exceptions for marriages booked before the pandemic began.

Virus precautions were on full display, with a maximum of 25 people at the event, temperature checks at the door and hand sanitizer

throughout the venue. The wedding was also wrapped up in just 30 minutes. The only hint of physical intimacy came when Ozdemir, whom Octora first met on social media, briefly took off his mask for his bride to feed him a piece of wedding cake.

Their reception party was cancelled and only a compromise with the mosque allowed the pair to proceed with the ceremony on Wednesday, earlier than planned. "All people must pass our disinfectant gate after being checked with a thermal gun," Al Akbar mosque spokesman Helmy M Noor said. Octora said she was still happy with the wedding despite the restrictions. "We were worried that if we stuck to March 29 for the vows things might have happened and we would not have been able to marry in the end," she said. — AFP



SURABAYA: Indonesian bride Irra Chorina Octora and her Turkish partner Yavuz Ozdemir, wearing face masks amid concerns of the COVID-19 coronavirus, speak during their wedding ceremony in Surabaya on March 25, 2020. — AFP

25 dead in attack on Sikh-Hindu temple in Kabul

KABUL: At least 25 people were killed Wednesday in an attack on a Sikh-Hindu temple in Afghanistan's capital where worshippers were offering morning prayers, the latest brutal assault claimed by the Islamic State group. The incident, highlighting the country's ongoing violence, came several hours before Afghanistan's National Security Council announced that the Taliban and government officials would hold a historic meeting face-to-face over a prisoner exchange.

Along with a raging insurgency, impoverished Afghanistan is reeling from a massive cut in US aid while it struggles with political deadlock and rising coronavirus cases. The Taliban denied any involvement in the latest attack, for which the Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility, according to the SITE intelligence group.

Witness Raju Singh Sonny told AFP a man in a police uniform burst into the temple in central Kabul, shot a guard and started attacking worshippers in the main hall. "Several other attackers also entered the building and they were going from room to room shooting people," Sonny said. Only a few thousand Sikhs and Hindus are estimated to reside in what is an overwhelmingly Muslim nation.

There were conflicting accounts about how many gunmen were involved, with security sources giving differing numbers, between one and four. At least one attacker was subsequently killed by security forces in an hours-long clearing operation. Anarkali Kaur Honaryar, a Sikh member of



KABUL: An Afghan security personnel (left) stands along with Sikhs near the site of an attack to a Sikh temple in Kabul. — AFP

the Afghan parliament, told AFP about 150 people had been inside the temple, where several families also live and worshippers gather for morning prayers. "Some people inside the temple are hiding and their phones are off," Honaryar said while the attack was ongoing.

Interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian said 25 civilians had been killed and eight others wounded, while 80 people had been rescued. Graphic images posted online showed several bodies as well as terrified people who appeared to be Sikhs running from the scene. "Such cowardly attacks on the places of religious worship of the minority community, especially at this time of (the coronavirus) pandemic, is reflective of the diabolical mindset of the perpetrators and their backers," the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement. Sikhism and Hinduism are rooted in India.

Afghan leaders' 'failure'

IS has a history of targeting Afghan Sikhs and Hindus. In recent months, the jihadist group has suffered mounting setbacks after being hunted by US and

Afghan forces as well as Taliban offensives targeting their fighters, but it still retains the ability to launch major assaults on urban centres.

To add to Afghanistan's woes, Washington slashed the amount of aid to the country this week after President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah, who has also proclaimed himself president, failed to resolve their standoff. Following a visit to Kabul, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the US would immediately cut \$1 billion and was prepared to pull another \$1 billion in 2021. The US and the Taliban signed a deal last month that was supposed to pave the way for talks between the Afghan leadership and the insurgents, but with Kabul unable to agree who is in government, the talks stalled. The issue of the prisoners has been a major sticking point in the weeks since the signing. But on Wednesday Afghanistan's National Security Council said the Taliban and Ghani's government would meet to discuss an initial release of 100 insurgent prisoners by March 31. — AFP

China reports 67 new cases

BEIJING: Mainland China reported a second consecutive day of no new local coronavirus cases as the country's epicenter of the epidemic Hubei province opened its borders, but imported cases rose as Beijing ramped controls to prevent a resurgence of infections. A total of 67 new cases were reported as of end-Wednesday, up from 47 a day earlier, all of which were imported, China's National Health Commission said in a statement yesterday. The total number of cases now stands at 81,285. The commission reported a total of 3,287 deaths at the end of Wednesday, up six from the previous day.

All of the new patients on Wednesday were travelers who came to China from overseas, with the mainland reporting no locally transmitted infections. Shanghai reported the most cases with 18 followed by Inner Mongolia region at 12 and Guangdong province at 11. About 90% of all the imported cases are Chinese passport holders, Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui told a press conference yesterday, adding that 40% of them are overseas Chinese students returning amid rising infections abroad.

"We understand some overseas students are eager to come home...But under the current circumstances, by staying put, they can avoid being cross-infected in the hurried journey home or getting stuck mid-journey when the countries they transit in tighten border controls," Luo said. Fearing a new wave of infections from imported cases, authorities have ramped up quarantine and screening measures in other major cities including Beijing, where any travelers arriving from overseas must submit to centralized quarantine.

The number of new daily cases in China remain down sharply from the height of the outbreak in the country in February, allowing Beijing to push for restarting economic activity in the world's second biggest economy. Hubei province, home to some 60 million people, reported no new cases on Wednesday and opened its borders. Public transport restarted and residents in the city of Xianning strolled the streets wearing masks. — Reuters

Lifestyle

Friday Times

FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2020

www.kuwaittimes.net

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Wash your hands after stroking your pet, say French experts

A French medical body urged pet owners on Wednesday to take precautions like washing hands after stroking dogs or cats, saying the risk of catching COVID-19 from animals “cannot be ruled out”. Even though there is no evidence yet that domestic animals can transmit the virus to humans or get sick from it, there could be a potential risk, said the French Academy of Medicine, which advises the government on epidemics and has set up a dedicated COVID-19 monitoring group.

The SARS outbreak of 2002-2003, caused by a coronavirus genetically close to COVID-19, was able to infect several animal species including racoons, cats and hamsters, the academy said. And two dogs whose Hong Kong owner was infected with COVID-19 have also tested positive, it said. One of the dogs had a very low virus count, the academy said, and later tested negative, while the second is still being monitored. Neither have displayed any signs of illness, but “these scientific observations suggest that COVID-19 can be transmitted to dogs by a contaminated owner,” it said.

But it noted that there is nothing to suggest so far that dogs can infect humans or other animals. While reiterating that France’s Anses health agency and the World Organisation for Animal Health consider animal-to-human transmission unlikely, the academy nevertheless advised pet owners to “reinforce” their hygiene measures, including regular hand-washing after touching their pet and “not allowing them to lick your face”.

It also recommended separating an infected owner from their animal companion “during the period that the sick person may excrete the virus”, for example when coughing. But the academy emphasized that “in a home where a sick person has COVID-19, the risk for people living under the same roof is much bigger from contact with the sick person than with the pet”. —AFP

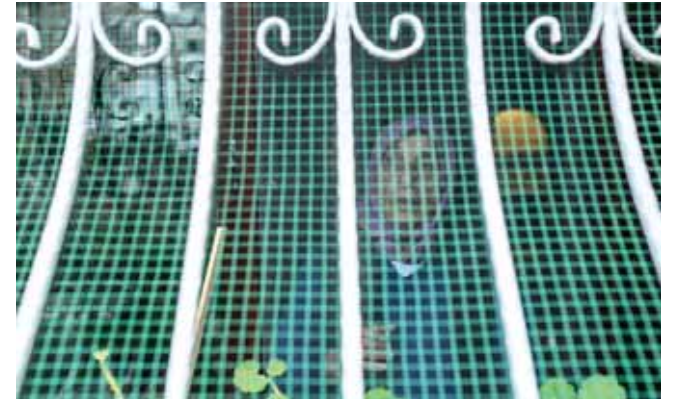
Peru saves bats blamed for coronavirus

Authorities called Wednesday for worried Peruvians to stop killing bats after rescuing 200 that were going to be burnt by peasants believing them to be spreading the coronavirus. “We must not distort the situation due to the pandemic. Bats are not our enemies,” the National Service of Wild Forests and Fauna (SERFOR) said in a statement on Wednesday. SERFOR called for calm after peasants in Culden, in the northern Cajamarca region, attacked bats with fire. “The attackers attacked the mammals because they thought they were spreading the coronavirus,” said the agency.

The bats were rescued by SERFOR staff and released in a cave far away from Culden. SERFOR said bats can also be beneficial to humans as “70 percent of the species in the world feed off insects, many of which are harmful to agriculture and our health, like mosquitos that spread dengue and other diseases.” Jessica Galvez-Durand, who is in charge of wild fauna at SERFOR, said people should avoid eating wild animals and that using their flesh in medicines was also risky. In some Asian countries such as China, where the coronavirus pandemic originated, bat meat is considered a delicacy. Many experts believe a bat infecting a pangolin — a small, scaly endangered species — that was then eaten by people was the source of the novel coronavirus’s transmission to humans. —AFP



Sevim Ozkan, an 85-year-old Turkish woman who lives alone in her home, waits with her basket for her neighbor (not pictured) to bring her medicine.



Have Koc, 87-year-old Turkish woman who lives alone in her home talks to her neighbor as she has her breakfast.

Home deliveries for Turkey’s elderly come in a basket through the window

“One kilo of bananas, please!” 83-year-old Yuksel shouts down from her fourth-floor window to the grocer’s shop on the corner of her Istanbul street before lowering her basket on a rope. Weighing the bananas, the chatty grocer puts them in a bag, loads up the basket taking the money left inside and calls up to his waiting customer: “Pull!” Yuksel does so, until the basket is back up to her window where she takes the groceries inside. The age-old practice, still a familiar sight on the streets of Istanbul, has gained new relevance since Turkish authorities announced on Sunday that they were ordering people aged over 65 to stay at home in the battle against the new coronavirus.

“Before, we were receiving maybe 10 orders a day and this number has reached 50 now,” grocer Zafer Gundogdu in the Ferikoy neighborhood of Istanbul’s Sisli district, told AFP. “Whatever they need, we are at the disposal of our old clients, either filling baskets dropped or delivering at their door from 7:00 am until 10:00 pm.” Butcher Zeynel Ozuner, whose business is in the same neighbourhood, says that he is doing what he can to ensure the elderly do not go without. “They are also our neighbours. We deliver them bread or a newspaper, not just meat,” he said.

Turkey as of Wednesday had officially recorded 44 deaths from coronavirus, most of them, according to Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, were elderly people. “I am appealing to our elders. This society needs your life experience... Please do not risk your life and stick to the measures,” Koca urged this week. As well as the order for the elderly to stay home, authorities have taken a raft of measures from shutting schools and universities to banning mass prayers but so far have stopped short of a full lockdown.

Swinging in parks

Many elderly had flocked to outdoor areas and filled parks on a sunny Saturday before the ban entered into force despite government pleas to stay home. In the southern city of Adiyaman, older people could be seen taking a turn on a swing or seesaw in a children’s park. One of the old men even pushed his swinging friend with the help of his walking stick. Younger people meanwhile took to social media, expressing hopes that the state would declare a “state of emergency” as they were unable to keep their parents at home and were worried.

Some municipalities across Turkey however have taken more drastic measures. Park benches have been uprooted from the ground by local officials in Uskudar on the Asian side of Istanbul to discourage older people from going out. The municipality also shared a witty tweet: “We love you but don’t force us to do this,” it read, showing a picture of an old man about to leave his apartment building who finds his street dug up by a bulldozer. In the

northwestern city of Edirne, parks were circled by a wire fence, while in Ankara, authorities suspended free public bus rides for the elderly.

‘Not fair’

Ester Hazan, a 70-year-old woman living in Istanbul, complained that the ban should be in place for everyone, not just the elderly. She had ventured out in the morning to do food shopping in order to look after her 100-year-old father who is staying with her, she said. But, she was caught out by a shopkeeper. “He threatened to call the police and yelled at me to go home. “I cannot stand this,” she said, adding that she could not order things by phone as she worried about being tricked. “This is not fair. Either everyone is in or everyone is out,” Hazan said.

For Yuksel, having her groceries hoisted up through the window does not put paid to all her concerns. “I am so sad, I am stuck at home,” she told AFP from her window, visibly upset. But not all of those affected are desperate. “I have been at home for two weeks, I am not bored,” 83-year-old Mehmet Ozcan enthusiastically told AFP from his window, wearing a red beanie. “I have a big garden where I have memories. I also have an interest in pictures,” he said. “I’ve been collecting old family photos for 35, 40 years. That’s how I am keeping myself busy and spending time.”—AFP



Lutfiye Yesilbas, 89-year-old Turkish woman who lives alone in her home lowers down her basket as her neighbor waits to take it at Kadikoy, in Istanbul. —AFP photos

Raising awareness about the COVID-19 in Gaza



Palestinian artist Samah Said (left) paints an N95 protective mask worn by fellow artist Dorgham Krakeh (right) for a project raising awareness about the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, in Gaza City on March 24, 2020.—AFP photos



Palestinian artist Samah Said puts on a painted N95 protective mask.



Palestinian artist Samah Said paints on a N95 protective mask.



Palestinian artist Dorgham Krakeh paints on a N95 protective mask.



Palestinian artist Dorgham Krakeh holds a painted N95 protective mask.

Apocalypse delayed? **'Walking Dead'** finale postponed by virus

When will this apocalypse finally be over? That is the question being asked by "The Walking Dead" television fans, after producers revealed they had not been able to finish making the popular zombie show's series finale due to coronavirus. "Current events have unfortunately made it impossible to complete post-production of 'The Walking Dead' Season 10 finale, so the current season will end with its 15th episode on April 5," network AMC tweeted. "The planned finale will appear as a special episode later in the year."

"The Walking Dead" — based on a comic book about a post-apocalyptic zombie-ridden vision of the United States — is one

of the most successful shows in the history of US cable television, smashing viewership records during its long run. With no firm date set for the series conclusion, fans of the hit were left raging — but also noting the irony. More than half of Americans are under some form of lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, with nobody certain when life will return to normal. "It's turning into a documentary looking at the current state of the planet," tweeted one fan. "This apocalypse totally sucks," wrote another.—AFP



In this file photo Executive producers Robert Kirkman (left) and David Alpert attend the premiere of AMC's "The Walking Dead" Season 9" at the DGA Theatre in Los Angeles.—AFP

Lifestyle | Features



Evan Smith (12) plays online video games with his friend Alex White (12) while communicating through FaceTime at Ouston, as the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues, Ouston, Britain.—Reuters



A boy playing video games during the quarantine.

Online gaming booms as virus lockdowns keep millions at home

When two Spanish footballers took to the controls of “FIFA 20” after the coronavirus pandemic saw their La Liga match cancelled, a stadium-sized virtual audience watched online. The huge digital crowd last week is part of a spectacular boom for the digital gaming industry, as record numbers flock to online servers for distraction, entertainment and friendship with the “real world” seemingly falling apart. Real Betis striker Borja Iglesias kicked the winning goal using his own digital likeness in the 6-5 battle against Sevilla, which was broadcast on popular video game streaming platform Twitch.

It took place at the same time the original derby had been scheduled, before Spain’s premier tournament was postponed as part of containment measures that have also seen the country’s 46 million people largely confined to their homes. “We do all of this to entertain all of you, so that you can be at home enjoying it, insofar as it is possible with this epidemic,” the host of the broadcast told his audience of 60,000.

Nearly every country around the globe has reported cases of COVID-19 infection, with frantic efforts to contain the disease prompting the near total shutdown of some of the world’s biggest cities. Online gaming has proved a welcome diversion for many people chafing at movement restrictions, the cancellation of countless public events and a relentless onslaught of news about the pandemic. “It made me feel less depressed about being in a small space for a long time,” said Yang An, who was made to quarantine for two weeks in China after returning to Shanghai from her hometown last month. She told AFP that she passed the time



Online gaming has proved a welcome diversion for many people chafing at movement restrictions.

by playing for up to eight hours a day on her Nintendo Switch handheld console.

Surging demand

Internet providers have scrambled to shore up their networks in the face of surging demand. Gaming traffic on Verizon’s network shot up an “unprecedented” 75 percent in the space of a week, the US telco said recently. Software companies have also rushed to accommodate a record number of users. Rockstar Games, publisher of the Wild West-themed adventure title “Red Dead Redemption”, promised players it would keep its online servers running smoothly after it told its global workforce to work from home. The company also teased a roll-out of extra in-game activities to keep housebound player glued to their controllers.

Online gaming communities could “go some of the way to create the public space that’s been lost” in the wake of the pandemic, said Christian McCrea, a media studies lecturer specializing in games at Australia’s RMIT University. He pointed to Pokemon Go — a smartphone game that became a worldwide phenomenon in 2016 when it lured millions of people onto the streets for a virtual monster hunt — which was this month tweaked by its developer to make it easier for users to play at home.

‘Big impact’

McCrea said gaming habits were likely to see a massive transformation in the months ahead, with the prospect of further economic ructions and long stretches of social isolation looming on the horizon. “Overall the big impact will be younger kids at home for months on end with parents out of work,” he told AFP. “Games will be at the centre of a lot of their spare time.” Video games have long been blamed for causing a suite of health issues, from repetitive strain injuries to eyesight problems.

The World Health Organization classified gaming addiction as an illness in 2018, the same year China launched a crackdown on the industry on concerns that youngsters were spending too much time online. But veteran gamers now ironically appear among those best-placed to navigate the pandemic and its impact on everyday life. Twitch streamer “Loeya” told her million-plus fans in a broadcast last week that travel restrictions and school closures in her native Sweden and elsewhere were unlikely to alter her own mostly indoors, game-heavy schedule. “Technically I self-quarantined myself, like, three years ago,” the 22-year-old joked. —AFP

Quarrels, calories and toilet paper: Virus spawns US quarantine comedy

From quarreling couples to toilet paper hoarding, life under coronavirus lockdown across much of the United States has provided comedy material for those seeking light-hearted relief in these difficult times. More than 50 percent of Americans are under some form of lockdown, while regular TV comedy staples such as Saturday Night Live are on hiatus, prompting many to turn to internet memes for amusement.

Short-form video platform TikTok has 1.3 million videos dedicated to a new coronavirus song — including dance routines with synchronized coughs. #Boredathome clips of people twerking, planking and dressing up in giant Pikachu outfits to break the monotony have been viewed 2.1 billion times. Another TikTok video of a hamster perched on its hind legs appearing to “wash” its hands inside a tiny doll’s house has been viewed more than 800,000 times. “It is truly sad that a hamster just genuinely offered more useful public health advice in one 12-second TikTok than the president has in multiple addresses to the nation,” quipped comedian John Oliver, broadcasting his “Last Week Tonight” show from an empty studio.

Like Oliver, several late-night comedy hosts have taken to broadcasting online from sealed-off settings, including their own homes. Stephen Colbert appeared live from his own bathtub, counseling viewers to “look on the bright side — you’re finally going to get a chance to binge watch all that toilet paper you bought.” “Based on my current level of inactivity and stress baking, I definitely will not be flattening my curves,” added the host of CBS’s “The Late Show.” Trevor Noah renamed his Comedy Central program as “The Daily Social Distancing Show,” advising viewers anxious about President Donald Trump’s handling of the crisis to “binge-watch the first eight years” of the Obama presidency instead.

‘Stuck here with you’

Less established comedians, many of whom depend on live stand-up shows for a living, have reached new audiences online — with many jokes again revolving around the pandemic. Comedians Taylor Tomlinson and Sam Morril began dating in real life just before the crisis, and their series of short, scripted videos about being confined together has had tens of thousands of views. “Don’t enter a brand new, long-distance relationship right before a pandemic,” wrote Tomlinson on Instagram alongside the first video of “New Couple Gets Quarantined.” “I cannot believe I’m stuck here with you — I’d rather be Tom Hanks in Castaway,” she shouts at Morril during a row in one episode. “I’d rather be Tom Hanks now, with coronavirus!” he replies.

Gus Johnson’s video entitled “People who are going to parties right now” racked up over 1.65 million YouTube views, lampooning the selfishness of young people who mistakenly believe they are immune to the virus. Online comedy sketch group Smosh published an episode entitled “Every Quarantine Ever,” featuring a heavy-set man’s desperate struggle to get off the couch and do a single pushup, and a woman making small talk to a stranger on the phone, including “So how much toilet paper do you have?” —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Tourism goes virtual in coronavirus-confined California

“Here is the ocean, everybody!” announced Adam Duford, as his guided tour of Santa Monica arrived at the world-famous beach. But Duford was standing all alone on the California coast, with no tourists to be found, and making no money. The image of the Pacific ocean was being broadcast live on social networks via his smartphone, with the crashing waves appearing pixelated and interrupted by bad signal. The spread of the novel coronavirus has grounded flights and prompted a statewide “stay-at-home” order — bids to prevent the disease’s spread that have crippled tourism. So Duford has been forced to park his open-top buses, and try a new approach to reach those locked in their homes.

“Without people, there is absolutely no revenue to come in, so basically my strategy is just going into hibernation and being creative and productive... try to think positive,” the owner of Surf City Tours told AFP. “I hope everybody is safe and social distancing,” he said at the start of his virtual tour, which he plans to run every other day. With a phone in one hand and notebook in the other, Duford began his tour on a pleasant spring day at “Chez Jay,” the historic eatery where Marilyn Monroe and President John F. Kennedy used to meet. He narrated the city’s development from the arrival of the Spanish through the construction of the pier which is visited by millions of people each year — but is now closed due to the pandemic.

‘Escape’

California, the nation’s most populous state and the world’s fifth-largest economy, has suffered more than 2,200 confirmed coronavirus cases, including at least 42 deaths. This week, the beach is empty. It is a far cry from scenes at the weekend, when tens of thousands of Californians ignored Governor Gavin Newsom’s order to stay at home. On Monday, Newsom ordered the closure of all parking lots at beaches and parks — a “soft closure” to dissuade further visitors. It is another blow to the state’s tourism sector, which injected more than \$145 billion into the economy last year, according to Visit California. The tourism nonprofit was forecasting a 3.9 per cent growth this year before the virus struck.

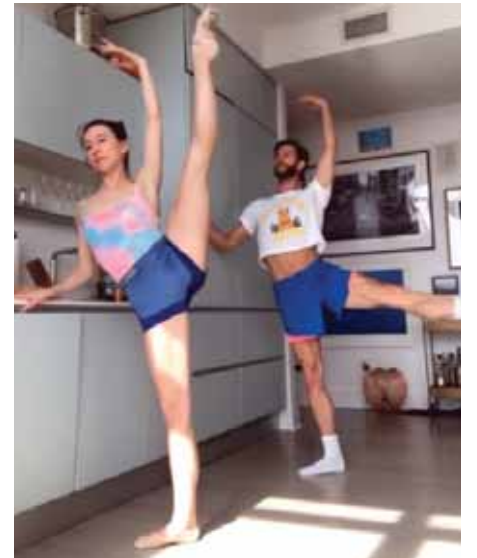
Instead, the Hollywood Walk of Fame lies deserted, with the final attempts to round up passengers for tours of the stars’ homes and hangouts abandoned last week. “On a week like this, spring break is kicking into high gear, we would expect to have thousands of guests,” said Duford. He bought the company a year ago, and has seven vehicles which he expected to roll out by now. The two-hour tours start at \$49, while the full five-and-a-half-hour experiences cost \$85. Instead, he has had to lay off seven employees.—AFP



Adam Duford, owner of Surf City Tours, poses for a photo in one of his tour buses on an empty street near the beach in Santa Monica, California.—AFP



In this file photo taken on October 9, 2019 a dancer of the Paris Opera Ballet performs during the dancing show “Degas Danse” on the sidelines of the exhibition “Degas at the Opera” at the Orsay museum in Paris.— AFP



Isabella Boylston and James Whiteside, principal dancers at American Ballet Theatre, use a kitchen counter as a barre in this video posted to Instagram.

Dancing with myself Ballet stars stay on their toes in virus lockdown

Ballet stars are determined they will not be bowed into playing the dying swan to the coronavirus. From using their sofas as a barre, keeping up their classes by video conference, or posting stretching tutorials on Instagram, dancers from some of the world’s top companies are not letting the lay up caused by the virus erode the iron discipline they need to keep in peak physical form. The stars of the American Ballet Theatre Isabella Boylston and James Whiteside — known for their jokey relationship — have posted a video of them using a kitchen worktop as a stand-in barre, while Russian Vadim Muntagiroy, a principal dancer of the Royal Ballet in London, has thrilled fans with a video of himself pirouetting in his living room.

Others are giving still more humorous insights into their changed daily stay-at-home routines, with Iana Salenko, star of the Staatsballett Berlin, doing her pointes holding her baby, or the former Paris Opera stalwart Isabelle Guerin doing her ironing on tippy toe. Ballet dancers grow up with a salutary warning about keeping in peak condition ringing in their ears. “When I miss a class one day, I notice it. The second day the teacher notices it. And the third, the public can see it.” So what happens when dancers might effectively be laid up for weeks or months on end? “We all have the same fear of wasting away physically,” Hugo Marchand, the star dancer of the Paris Opera told AFP.

Self-discipline

Every day at 11 am since the French government ordered people to stay at home on Tuesday, he and seven of his colleagues have been hooking up for a video-conferenced “collective barre practice” with the former star dancer and coach Florence Clerc. “Ballet dancers have a lot of self-discipline but we always need a teacher to motivate us and give us little steers,” said the dancer, who left Paris for the South of France just before the country was put into lockdown. “We do the exercises she tells us to do while holding a sideboard or sofa. We can hear the energy the others are putting into it, and every chat and joke. It does us all good,” said Marchand.

But the video link-ups have their limits. “You can’t do jumps or pirouettes on the tiles or floorboards of a little apartment” — the risk of injury is just too great, he added. The star finishes off his virtual class with stretches, press-ups and abdominal exercises. For dancers — used to strict discipline from a tender age and hours of classes even on performance days — being stuck alone at home “is difficult to live with”. “Just like high-level athletes, our instruments are our bodies. For us training is a physical need just like eating or sleeping,” Marchand said.

Fear of injury

Many are wondering how they will readapt when the lockdown finally ends. “To avoid injuries, dancers certainly shouldn’t go back too quickly into the studio,” said

teacher and former Paris Opera dancer Arnaud Dreyfus. “It’s a bit like after maternity leave or the summer holidays, you have to go slowly,” he added. Dreyfus has closed his Paris dance studio but has been posting exercises every day on Facebook for both professional and amateur dancers to follow. As well as young dancers from the Paris Opera School — the “little rats” as they are known — his followers also include performers at La Scala in Milan and dancers in the Netherlands and Belgium.

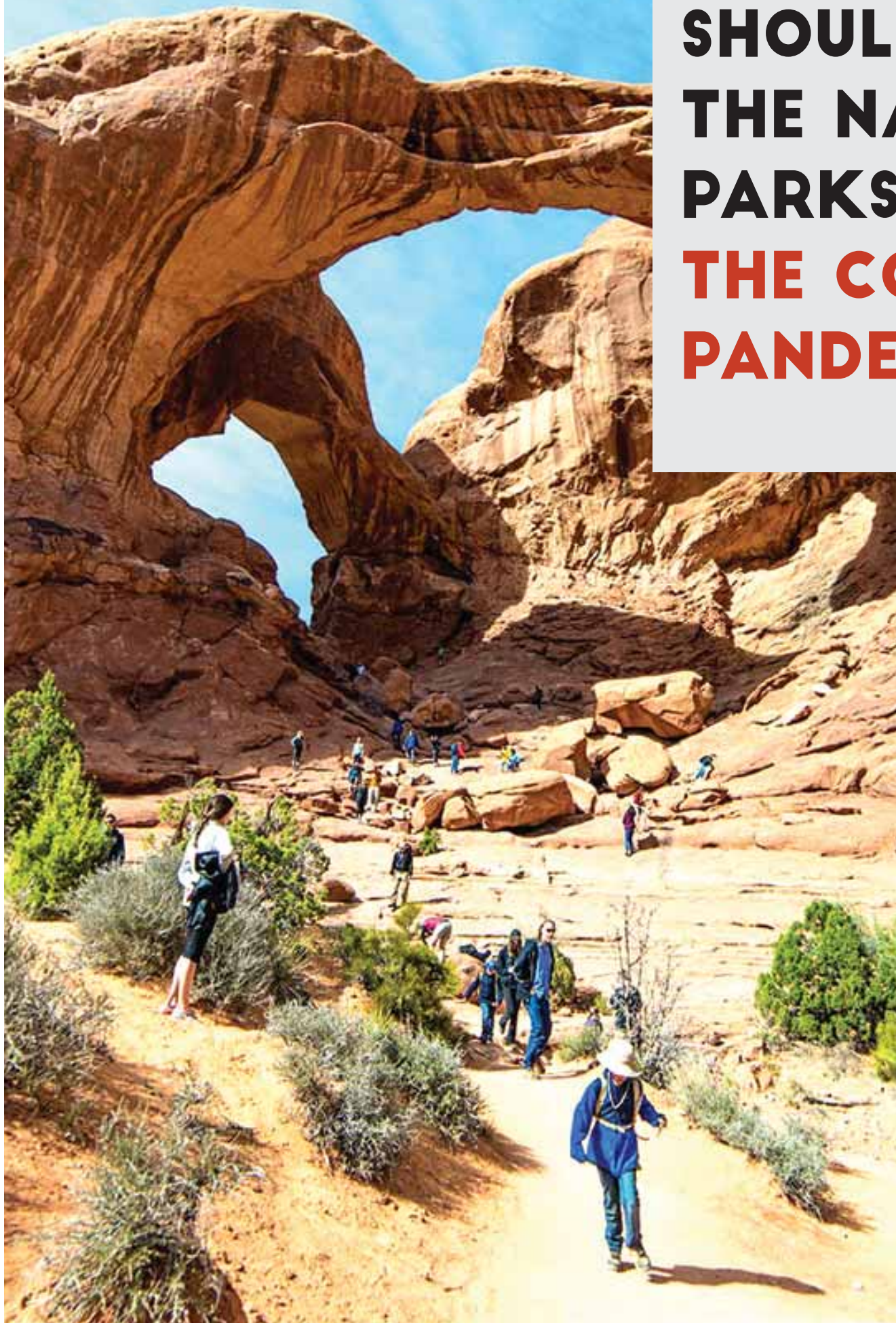
“I give the same course I do in the studio with indications and corrections. Of course it can be a little bit cold because we are used to seeing the dancers refine the movement live in front of us,” Dreyfus said. Dance companies are also organizing themselves, with “90 directors of companies from the Bolshoi to the Royal Ballet creating a WhatsApp group” to share information, Kader Belarbi of the Capitole in Toulouse told AFP. “Everyone has the same worry: training the dancers and when will we start again,” said Belarbi, who is making a barre video with his wife Laure Muret on their terrace. “Over the long haul even if everyone trains at home, it won’t be enough,” said Belarbi, who was in the middle of creating a piece based around the French artist Toulouse-Lautrec when the virus lockdown struck.—AFP

SHOULD YOU VISIT THE NATIONAL PARKS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC?

By Leigh Kunkel

At a time when many of us are isolated in our homes and encouraged to stay more than 6ft away from others when we do go outside, it's tempting to dream of the wide-open spaces, beautiful landscapes and challenging trails provided by so many national parks in the United States. But the global and local effects of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, are much more complicated than simply getting into your car and setting out for a campsite.

Visiting the national parks might sound like an excellent way to practice "social distance" but the effects on small towns might make the pandemic worse for some.
— Andrew Repp / Shutterstock





Canyonlands National Parks

“Living in Moab, I originally thought we’d be a bit protected from the impact of coronavirus because we’re so isolated,” says Abbi Hearne, a Utah-based adventure photographer who has been vocal on her Instagram about the impact of COVID-19 on her community. “But as spring break season began, I realized it was the opposite. We saw a huge flood of tourists this week coming in from all over the country and the numbers only grew as other spring break plans, such as skiing in Colorado, were cancelled due to the virus.” Moab, Utah is the launching point for visitors to many popular parks, including Arches and Canyonlands, and in recent days the small city has received an influx of visitors. According to a report from the Salt Lake Tribune, occupancy at area hotels is already at 80 percent and with only 17 beds and two respirators available at the small hospital, an outbreak of the virus could spread rapidly and quickly overwhelm Moab’s limited medical resources.

The Utah Department of Health issued an order prohibiting new visitors from camping in the parks, but the expanse and isolation of the area makes it difficult for parks employees to monitor. Visitors practicing “social distancing” arrive to small towns “Our local population is 15 percent elderly, and we are still seeing thousands of out-of-town travelers,” says Hearne. “The reality is similar for most gateway towns to our national parks. Increased visitation in the name of social distancing is dangerous for these small towns as well as national park employees. I have friends who live and work in Yosemite Valley who are afraid for their lives should they experience an outbreak from tourists – they don’t have a hospital in the valley.”

Impacts on indigenous groups

In eastern California, the Owens Valley – also called Payahuunadu – is a popular site for fishing, hiking, camping and climbing, and has also been a destination for many visitors eager to escape the confines of homebound isolation. But those people are ignoring the danger in which they’re putting the area’s residents, says Jolie Varela, founder of Indigenous Women Hike and citizen of the Tule River Yokut and Paiute Nations. “I’m seeing on Instagram and Facebook that people are literally talking about escaping, about coming here to get away and just to go camping,” Varela says. “But I think people are not taking into consideration how that could be limiting resources for the people here.” The strain on local

stores has been enormous, Varela says, as visitors stockpile necessities on their way home, leaving nothing for residents. “It’s pretty disheartening that our community doesn’t even have what they need here. And we live here year-round and also as indigenous people, we’ve always been here and we will always be here.”

The effects of coronavirus could be particularly calamitous for the indigenous population because of its increased mortality rate among the elderly. “We have a very vulnerable population and our elders hold our ceremonies and our traditions and our language,” Varela says. “They’re the culture bearers in our community and they’re the ones who are most vulnerable. If the virus comes in and affects our elders it would have a devastating toll on our community. That’s our knowledge right there. And we still have so much to learn from our knowledge keepers.”



Accessible national parks like Yosemite might be the first places people think to go during a pandemic, but it could put an undue burden on the towns nearby.— Jesselindemann / Getty Images



Ellis Island



The Washington Monument

Visitors strain park resources

In addition to affecting local communities, visiting national parks during the COVID-19 outbreak puts increased pressure on already-strained park resources and employees, who are then at a greater risk of being exposed to the virus. The Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, a group comprising former national parks employees, called for the National Parks Service to close "all facilities that require employees and/or members of the public to be in close proximity in confined spaces." Some parks – like the Washington Monument and Ellis Island – have already been closed to the public, while others – like Big Bend National Park and Crater Lake National Park – have closed their visitors centers and other points of contact. But the majority remain open and must be staffed and maintained accordingly.

People who live in areas without a shelter-in-place order are still allowed to leave their homes to go for a run or to take the dog for a walk around the neighborhood, though practicing social distancing while you're outside is still essential to stop the spread of the virus. Some cities that have sufficient medical capabilities and supplies are even encouraging spending some time outdoors to ward off cabin fever. But resist the temptation to set out for more isolated areas, where resources are already stretched thin and vulnerable communities could be put at additional risk by your actions. "The parks are going to be here in the future when people are well," says Varela. "Your adventure can wait."

— www.lonelyplanet.com



Yosemite Valley



These *Icelanders* skip the hot springs for ice baths

Using slow, deliberate movements and deep breathing, bathers immerse themselves in the waters of an ice-covered lake in southwestern Iceland. While others might opt for the soothing hot springs for which the country is famous, this hardy group prefers an ice bath, all in the name of wellness. The temperature above the frozen lake of Kleifarvatn, one of the country's deepest, is minus six degrees Celsius (21.2 degrees Fahrenheit).

Equipped with an axe, Andri Einarsson, the co-instructor on this unusual seminar, cuts a hole through the sheet of ice covering the lake, located less than an hour's drive from the famous Blue Lagoon geothermal spa whose milky blue waters average 38 degrees C.

Up on shore, the group of about 15, who have come from the outskirts of the capital Reykjavik, is getting ready. Clad in puffer jackets or thick sweaters, the participants warm up with a series of movements and breathing exercises reminiscent of the traditional Maori haka war dance. "They were just working on getting the system ready (for the cold), challenging their mind, just tapping in and doing what we call the 'brown fat activation'," Einarsson tells AFP.

Cold as a remedy

The breathing technique is one of the pillars of the Wim Hof Method, named after a Dutch athlete. Nicknamed the "Iceman,"

Wim Hof has been setting world records and pursuing extraordinary feats of cold resistance for decades. In 2007, he climbed to an altitude of 7,400 meters (24,278 feet) on Mount Everest dressed only in shorts, and he's completed a barefoot half-marathon north of the Arctic Circle. He lauds the benefits of his cold therapy — which combines breathing techniques, exposure to cold and meditation — as helping combat fatigue and stress and strengthening the immune system.

On the Kleifarvatn shore, despite the freezing cold, one by one the jackets and sweaters are discarded in favor of swimwear, and the participants begin to take the plunge. Many don't even hesitate — the exercise marks the end of a four-week program in which they've progressively been exposed to the cold. It began with water at 10 degrees, followed by a bath full of ice, before finally braving the frozen lake. For two minutes they endure the icy water, concentrating on inhaling and exhaling, which according to the adepts is the key to ignoring the biting pangs of the freezing temperatures. Once out, walking back to dry land presents another challenge, as the cold water makes most people's legs go numb. "There is this feeling of needles and everything starts itching a little bit," Marco Pizzolato tells AFP, as he returns from the hole in the ice.

'All your worries'

When it comes to pain relief, the benefits of cold exposure have been known about since ancient times. However the practice has been gaining popularity among athletes for the last 15 years to help them recover faster from workouts and injuries. Scientists however are not yet fully convinced. "We



Andri Einarsson, assists a participant who baths in the waters of an ice-covered lake in southwestern Iceland.

need more research before we can say for sure that it helps," Haukur Bjornsson, a doctor with the Icelandic national football team, tells AFP. "Cold water immersion is part of what is recommended to help with the recovery. But the most important thing is sleep and nutrition, those are the only things for which we have some strong sci-

entific proof," Bjornsson adds.

Different forms of cold therapy have found favor among the general public in recent years, with health clinics offering cryotherapy and fitness blogs preaching the benefits of cold showers. Most public baths now too offer pools with water between two and 10 degrees C. But Andri Einarsson stresses that it takes practice to actually enjoy the experience. "Everybody can go in an ice bath, sit there and... be tough. But surrendering to it is totally a whole other ball game," he says. While the science of the Wim Hof Method is still not understood or universally accepted, those participants questioned by AFP swore by its merits.

Ingvar Christiansen said that the practice "completely changed (his) life and way of thinking," as he recovered from a trying time in his life where he battled weight, burnout and divorce proceedings. He now prefers cold baths to vacationing abroad. "When I got out, I felt like I was coming home from a two-week vacation in Spain. You dump everything: all your worries, all your anxiety, it goes away."—AFP



Andri Einarsson, co-instructor, assists a participant who baths in the waters of an ice-covered lake in southwestern Iceland during a seminar on February 1, 2020 in Kleifarvatn, near Reykjavik.



A participant baths in the waters of an ice-covered lake in southwestern Iceland.



A participant baths in the waters of an ice-covered lake in southwestern Iceland.—AFP photos

Kids Page

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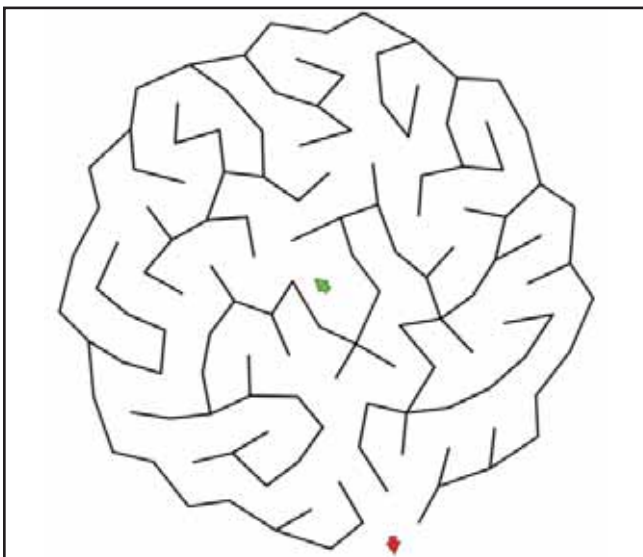
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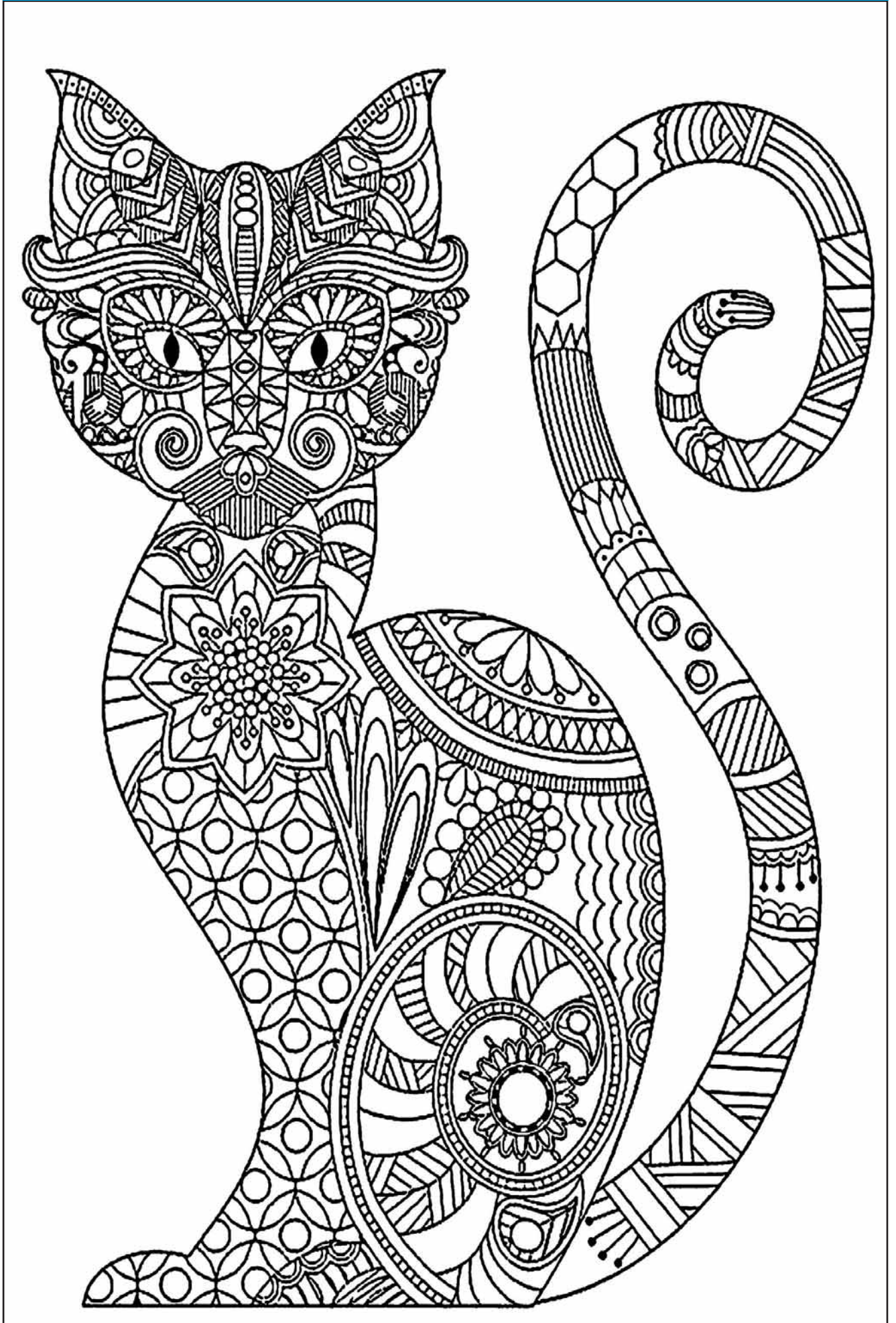
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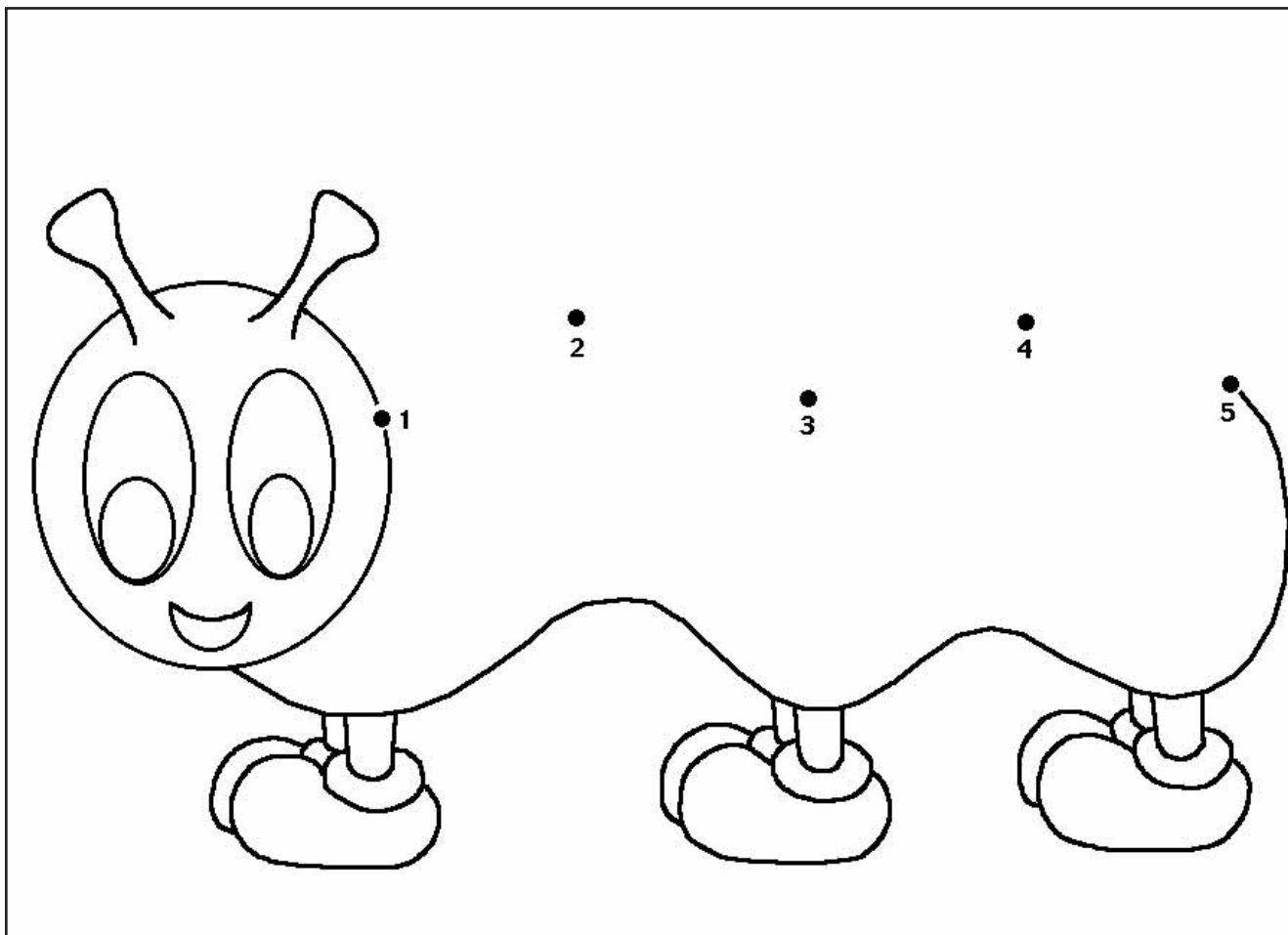
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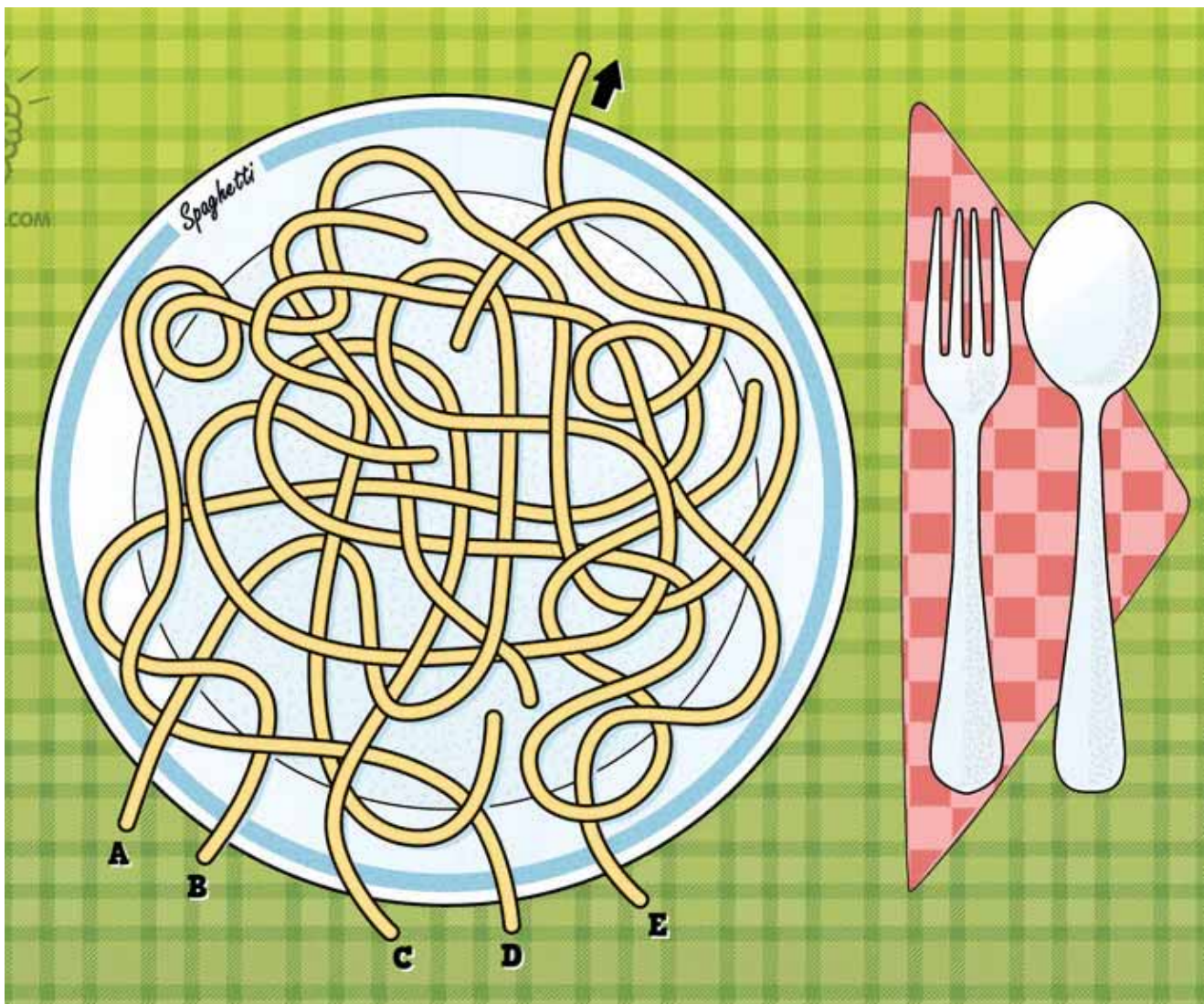
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Stars

STAR TRACK

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

You could spend much of your day advancing the interests of an organization dedicated to a cause that means a lot to you, Aries, perhaps in animal or children's rights. You tend to be service-oriented by nature, and today something you learn, perhaps from TV or the Internet, could excite your desire to make a difference to those you wish to serve. Expect to derive a lot of satisfaction from this. You're making a difference!

**Taurus (April 20-May 20)**

If you're single, Taurus, a new love could appear right there in your neighborhood. The person should be attractive, intelligent, free spirited, and very much attracted to you! You could meet this person in an unusual way and end up spending time together and making plans to spend more. Take care not to move too quickly. You won't want this new relationship to be like a meteor, burning out as quickly as it appeared.

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

Today you could hold a group meeting of some kind in your home, Gemini. The guests will probably include people in such interesting fields as astrology, metaphysics, environmentalism, and the arts. A love partner could also be present. Some fascinating discussions could take place, supplying you with enough food for thought to last for days. By the time everyone leaves, you could feel bonded far more strongly than when the party began. Enjoy!

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

Have you been reading romantic novels or watching romantic films lately, Cancer? This is probably because love is very much on your mind now. You may be involved in a passionate relationship or hoping for one. If it's the latter, don't expect to remain alone for very long. All signs indicate that romance is going to become a top priority for you for a while, starting now. Make sure you look your best whenever you go out!

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

Money earned through involvement in the arts, perhaps those combining creativity with computer technology, could come your way, Leo. Financially, you should be doing fairly well, so you might channel what you receive right back into this business. This is an excellent time to do this, as all signs indicate that this sort of activity could be very profitable over the next few years. Go for the gold, and enjoy yourself.

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

Have love matters been causing you excessive strain for a while, Virgo? If so, you can expect that to end now. Someone you love deeply reciprocates your feelings, and is very anxious to resolve any differences between you and look toward the future. This relationship will probably succeed if you go in with eyes wide open. Don't have unrealistic expectations of your partner. Learn to love human flaws as much as perfection.

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

If you're single and looking for love, Libra, you may find it today in an ephemeral way. You could find yourself falling hard for the proverbial stranger across the crowded room. That might pose a problem if the room is actually a crowded subway, but faith is called for here. If the person appears to share your attraction, you'll manage to find each other. You have a lot to look forward to. Enjoy your day.

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

Love certainly seems to make the world go round today, Scorpio. Is everyone around you deeply involved in a new or revitalized romance? You may be smitten with a very exciting person, perhaps from a foreign country or in the field of law, education, or publishing. Don't fight it, and don't worry about getting hurt. Relax and let yourself be loved. If nothing else, you should have a wonderful day!

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

Has the perfect career suddenly materialized out of nowhere, Sagittarius? If so, don't write it off as being too good to be true. It's very, very real! Take a few days to consider all your options and all possible contingencies. Talk to people who know the ins and outs of the field. If everything seems favorable, go for it. Such an opportunity may not come around again for a long time.

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

It doesn't seem fair that your workload has increased these last few days. Never mind that you still have all of your normal tasks to do, your boss expects you to finalize a new budget and write a proposal as well? Enlist the help of others if you can. If you can't, simply do the best you can without sacrificing time with your family and loved ones. Ultimately, Capricorn, the latter is more important.

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

You could have some strange, mystical dreams tonight, Aquarius, possibly involving angels or other spiritual beings. Their messages could well shed light on a romantic relationship that you might not understand well. Keep a notebook by your bed so you can write down the details of the dreams as soon as you awaken. You'll want to consider them very carefully to see if you can figure out what's going on.

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

Social events today could put you in touch with people in the arts, Pisces, particularly ones such as film, television, recording, and computer graphics that combine creativity with modern technology. If you're single, one might even be a potential romantic partner. If nothing else, these people could provide you with valuable insights and contacts so you can advance your own career, particularly if it's artistic in nature. Be attentive, and enjoy your evening.

Country Codes

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

Business

FRIDAY, MARCH 27, 2020

34 \$2tn rescue package passes
US Senate, heads to House



35 Singapore signals deep recession for
world as COVID-19 batters economy



36 China's factories reopen, only to fire
workers as virus shreds global trade



KUWAIT: Customers check jewelries at a gold jewelry shop in Kuwait. The precious metal had forged a seven-year peak on commodity markets this month as traders sought shelter from the COVID-19 pandemic and its destructive economic impact. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Gold sparkles in COVID-19 shadow

Yellow metal experiencing surging demand from traders, retail buyers

LONDON: Gold, prized by investors in times of crisis as a safe haven, is experiencing surging demand in the face of the coronavirus outbreak—from both commodity traders and retail buyers. The precious metal had forged a seven-year peak on commodity markets this month as traders sought shelter from the COVID-19 pandemic and its destructive economic impact.

The commodity has also rocketed as investors seek to guard against rising inflation—with many central banks injecting immense amounts of liquidity into the financial system to counter virus fallout.

'Phone has not stopped'

"The phone has not stopped ringing" be-

cause "demand has exploded", said Alessandro Soldati, boss of Gold Avenue, the online retail arm of Swiss refiner and ingots producer MKS PAMP Group. Over the last three weeks, as the new coronavirus strain spread across the globe, Gold Avenue experienced more sales than during the entire final quarter of last year. With most orders placed online, Gold Avenue has "all the tools" to help meet the rapid growth in demand, according to its chairman Omar Liess.

Some companies are encountering some issues meeting the sheer volume of demand. But the main problem is logistical—because so many flights are cancelled because of the coronavirus outbreak.

Customers still however have the option of

keeping their gold coins and bars in safes—because trading companies usually offer such storage solutions. And if they do want to take physical delivery of the glamorous precious metal, then customers face the prospect of a long wait. US-based online precious metal retailer JM Bullion has warned its customers to expect delays of more than 15 days as a result of "extreme order volumes".

Refineries hit by lockdown

Gold had already soared in value in the London Bullion Market to reach a December 2012 peak of \$1,703.39 per ounce on March 9. It has since fallen on modest profit-taking but remains at an elevated level of about \$1,600. That has

given a shot in the arm to retail prices—and demand shows no sign of abating after the global death toll from the new coronavirus strain topped 20,000 this week.

"Demand (for gold) has risen significantly in the past three to four weeks," said Liam Sheasby, marketing chief at British online bullion firm BullionByPost.

Experts argue there is no shortage of gold at the moment, apart from for newly-minted coins—but the situation is becoming more complex.

In Switzerland, gold refining titans PAMP, Valcambi and Argor-Heraeus—which together represent one third of global production—have temporarily halted operations at the request of the government. —AFP

Business

\$2tn rescue package passes US Senate, heads to House

Stimulus to help depleted hospitals and strained economy

WASHINGTON: The US Senate unanimously passed the nation's largest-ever rescue package late Wednesday, a \$2 trillion lifeline to suffering Americans, critically depleted hospitals and an economy all ravaged by a rapidly spreading coronavirus crisis. The measure cleared the Senate 96-0 after days of tumultuous, sometimes bitter negotiations and debate, as the US death toll for the pandemic soared past 1,000, with 68,000 confirmed infections.

Outbreaks have grown nationwide, but with particular fear that New York could be the next epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. "Let us tell them tonight that help is on the way, that they are not truly

alone, that this country, that this Senate, that this government is here for them in a time of dire need," top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer said moments before the vote.

"Let us marshal this government into action."

The measure now heads to the House of Representatives, where a Democratic leader said he expected it to pass by voice vote today before it

goes to President Donald Trump for his signature.

The monster package, thrashed out between Republicans, Democrats and the White House, provides direct cash payments to millions of hurting American taxpayers, amounting to \$3,400 for an average American family of four. It provides some \$500 billion in grants and loans to small businesses and core industries, including as much as \$50 billion for strained airlines and their employees.

It also surges \$100 billion of desperately needed resources for hospitals and other health facilities in dire need of medical equipment, and dramatically expands unemployment benefits to help workers sickened by

coronavirus or laid off during the crisis.

The United States has the third-highest number of infections globally behind China and Italy. About half are in New York state. "We still have the trajectory going up," said New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, adding that about 12 percent of the people who test positive require hospitalization. Cuomo said health officials anticipate



WASHINGTON, DC: The monster package, thrashed out between Republicans, Democrats and the White House, provides direct cash payments to millions of hurting American taxpayers, amounting to \$3,400 for an average American family. — AFP

about 120,000 coronavirus patients coming into New York's hospitals, which have a capacity of 50,000 beds.

The state has around 30,000 confirmed cases, he added, with 285 deaths. But the governor pointed to evidence suggesting New York's strict stay-at-home orders and social distancing meas-

ures have slowed the hospitalization rate. "The arrows are headed in the right direction," Cuomo told reporters. The intensity of the crisis caught the Trump administration by surprise, and by Wednesday Trump and his top lieutenants were demanding the Senate quicken the pace and pass the legislation. — AFP



Direct cash payments to citizens

Huge rescue plan only start, say US experts

WASHINGTON: The US Congress is poised to push through an emergency spending measure unlike any ever seen to help ease the economic damage inflicted by the coronavirus pandemic, but analysts warn it is only a first step. The massive \$2 trillion bill is expensive and covers huge swaths of US society. It includes cash payments to most Americans, expanded unemployment insurance and food benefits, loans to small businesses, funds to support overwhelmed hospitals and help for distressed industries like airlines.

But even Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell seems to acknowledge that it might not be enough to get the economy running again. "This is not even a stimulus package. It is emergency relief," McConnell said in a statement to the Senate.

But with some forecasters predicting a shocking 14 percent contraction of the US economy in the second quarter, as well as a severe global recession this year, economists urge lawmakers to prepare to do more to help cushion the blow for millions who have lost their jobs as huge areas of the economy are forced to shut down.



WASHINGTON, DC: The US Capitol is seen in Washington, DC as the US Senate unanimously passed the nation's largest-ever rescue package late Wednesday. — AFP

"No, it's not enough, there will be more. This is a moving target," Diane Swonk of Grant Thornton told AFP. "But the good news is, it's much more broad based, much more multifaceted," she said of the package. "That's what we need. And it's a really good start."

With more than half of the country's residents under some form of lockdown and the death toll over 800 with at least 60,000 confirmed cases, the world's largest economy is on life support and emergency treatment is critical if it is to emerge from the crisis.

But it is even more important because unlike other advanced economies, Ameri-

cans do not have a national healthcare system or national unemployment benefits available to everyone. Those gaps make administering aid a challenge.

Democrats and Republicans in the Senate worked through the night to reach an agreement, and are expected to vote on it later Wednesday, after which it must go to the House of Representatives for final approval before President Donald Trump can sign it into law.

"It is a good bill. Does it have everything we need? No," the Senate's top Democrat Chuck Schumer said. "America needed huge help quickly and I think we have risen to that occasion." — AFP

US joblessness to spike as virus hits businesses

WASHINGTON: With streets in major cities barren, and shops and restaurants forced to close due to the coronavirus pandemic, economists warn of a record explosion of Americans filing for unemployment benefits.

The Labor Department yesterday released its weekly data on first-time applications for jobless benefits covering the week ending March 21 — the first to show the epidemic's impact on the US economy. "Whatever the number, it will be horrific," said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics.

The data have been mundane for the past two years amid a very strong US labor market, but the situation has changed for this lowly report on the frontlines of the virus fallout.

Last week's report showed jobless claims surged to their highest level since September 2017, especially with a jump in applications from hotel and restaurant workers.

But that was just the tip of the iceberg. "The consensus for today's first post-apocalypse jobless claims number (1.5 million), looks much too low," Shepherdson said, adding that he is expecting a staggering 3.5 million. White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow acknowledged the report would show a jump, but said the market is expecting it.

"It's going to be a very large increase," he said on Fox Business Network. But economists cautioned that forecasting data in unprecedented times is dicey at best. — AFP

Business

Singapore signals deep recession for world as COVID-19 batters economy

Major fiscal, monetary stimulus expected

SINGAPORE: Singapore said yesterday it was planning for a deep recession due to the coronavirus pandemic as its economy suffered the worst contraction in a decade in the first quarter, reinforcing fears global activity will slump sharply this year. Singapore is among the world's most open economies and one of the first to report growth data since the virus spread from China earlier this year, portending more pain for other countries as they impose increasingly strict anti-virus measures.

Even though Singapore has so far avoided the lockdowns seen in other nations, its economy still shrank 2.2 percent in the first quarter from a year earlier, with heavy hits to services, construction and manufacturing, preliminary readings from trade ministry showed.

The small Southeast Asian city-state is a major financial center and port, making it a bellwether for global trade, and is a popular tourist destination. The contraction was the biggest since the 2009 financial crisis and was below economists' expectations for a 1.5 percent decline. On a quarterly basis, gross domestic product (GDP) shrank 10.6 percent, the lowest since 2010 and below expectations for a 6.3 percent decline. The data prompted the trade

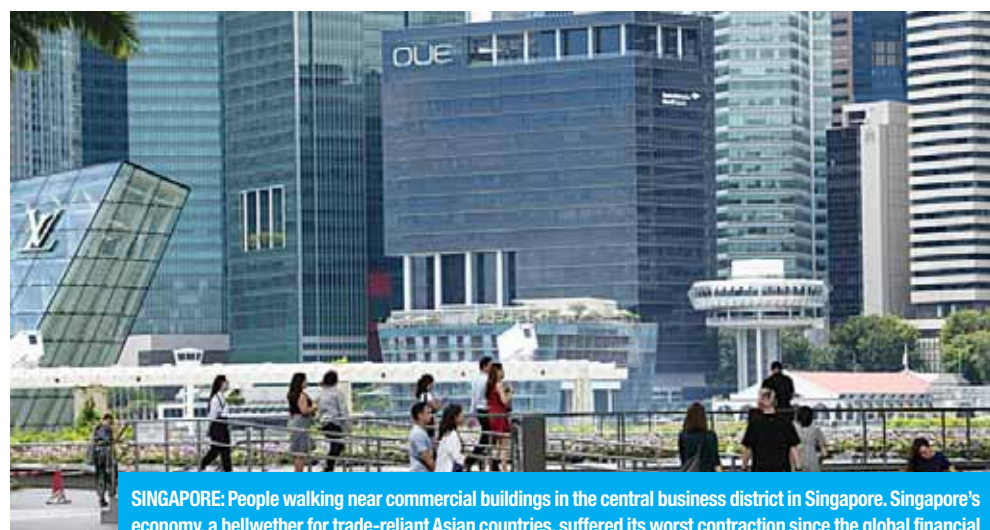


Biggest GDP contraction in a decade

ministry to cut its 2020 GDP forecast range to -4 percent to -1 percent, from a previous range of -0.5 percent to 1.5 percent, and firmed up investors' bets for imminent fiscal and monetary stimulus. "This could well be the worst recession ever on record for Singapore," said Irvin Seah, senior economist at Singapore's biggest bank DBS, predicting a 2.8 percent full-year contraction.

Economists polled by Reuters last week showed more than three-quarters believed the global economy is already in recession as the virus continues to spread, ending the longest expansion on record. Highlighting the suddenness and severity of the shock, separate data yesterday showed Singapore's industrial output plunged 22.3 percent in February from the previous month - the biggest contraction in official records going back to 1983, and far more than a forecast 11.5 percent fall.

Just weeks after announcing multi-billion dollar schemes to offset the impact of the outbreak on businesses and households in its annual budget, the finance ministry is set to announce more relief packages later. The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), meanwhile, has brought forward its



SINGAPORE: People walking near commercial buildings in the central business district in Singapore. Singapore's economy, a bellwether for trade-reliant Asian countries, suffered its worst contraction since the global financial crisis in the first quarter as the coronavirus pandemic escalated, official data showed yesterday.—AFP

semi-annual monetary policy statement to Monday, March 30, and many economists are expecting drastic easing not seen since the financial crisis as global central banks pull out all the stops. "The extent of the first two months already tells you...how bad it is going to get," said Selena Ling, head of treasury research and strategy at OCBC Bank.

"The likelihood is that they will bring out a

very big bazooka this afternoon, and come next Monday, MAS will also do what's necessary." Singapore has been battling the virus outbreak which has killed more than 21,000 globally since mid-January. It has seen a surge in mainly-imported infections in recent days, prompting it to order the closure of bars, discos, and cinemas and limit gatherings.—Reuters

IMF approves \$1.3bn aid for Jordan

WASHINGTON: The IMF on Wednesday approved a \$1.3 billion aid plan for Jordan, made all the more necessary by the global coronavirus pandemic. The program was initially announced at the end of January before the novel virus rocked the world's economy.

"Changes were made to the program to support unbudgeted spending covering emergency outlays and medical supplies and equipment," the IMF said in a statement.

"If the impact of the outbreak is deep enough to put at risk program objectives, the program will be adapted further to the changed circumstances, upon reaching understandings with the authorities," the statement added. Jordan will immediately receive a first tranche of about \$140 million. The rest will be dispensed over the rest of the program, subject to eight program reviews. In addition to funds for combatting the pandemic, the program also provides for structural reforms including lowering the price of electricity for businesses and facilitating youth employment.

Jordan, whose stability is considered central to that of the entire region, is one of the most important countries that receives foreign aid, including from the United States. The Middle Eastern nation has also long benefited from IMF aid programs in exchange for reforms.—AFP

Investors look to 2008 for guidance

LONDON: Investment banks are dusting off models from the 2008 financial crisis to gauge the right time to buy back into stock markets that have plunged 30 percent from their February record highs because of the coronavirus crisis. That inflection point is not easy to model when the virus is still spreading rapidly across Europe and the United States.

But the US government's \$2 trillion in fiscal stimulus, coming on top of unprecedented measures from the US Federal Reserve and other central banks on Tuesday triggered one of the sharpest global equity market rallies in decades. Wall Street's so-called fear gauge, the Cboe Volatility Index has also fallen from its highs. For some, the signals for a reversal are in place.

Veteran investor Bill Ackman told investors in his listed Pershing fund he had turned increasingly positive on stocks and credit, and taken off hedges he put in place in early March when markets first started cratering. He said Pershing was "redeploying our capital in companies we love at bargain prices that are built to withstand this crisis".

Goldman Sachs' view was that this week's record stock market rally had been led by "underweight" sectors, suggesting many funds had been covering short positions. Indeed, energy, travel and auto stocks were Tuesday's biggest gainers.

At Morgan Stanley, Andrew Sheets, head of cross-asset strategy, said in these situations, including in 2008, markets often trough well before the crisis actually ends.

From the 2008 trough there followed a decade of stunning gains that added more than \$25 trillion to global equity value. "The market won't need to see a peak in US (COVID) cases, it just needs to see some confirmation of the path and it needs to be happy with the path," Sheets said.

But so far he remains underweight credit and has only marginally upped equity exposure.

Getting it right

JPMorgan says there is more than one way of measuring it, especially given the unique nature of the crisis which hit the real economy first, with financial markets following. John Normand, JPM's head of cross-asset strategy said one model suggested now is the time to re-enter a quarter before a recession is likely to end. His view is that the coronavirus-induced recession will be "undoubtedly deep but also possibly the shortest-ever."

Normand also said investors could wait for "green shoots" or evidence of an actual upturn-reflected in a trough for JPMorgan's global Purchasing Managers Index. A third, valuation-based model triggers a "Buy" signal when risk-premia across several asset classes fall to certain "deep value" thresholds. Norman said the latter two models were not yet signalling it was time to buy. Notably, U.S. and European stock valuations based on a 12-month forward price-to-earnings ratios now have dipped well below historical averages, according to Refinitiv data. Meanwhile, credit markets are still sending out distress signals—yields on junk-rated US bonds are around 10 percent currently compared to 6 percent a month ago, meaning many companies may find it hard to service debt.

In Europe, an index of European credit default swaps, that measure the default risk of a basket of sub-investment grade companies, is off its peaks but remains elevated at around 520 basis points, almost double end-February levels. The volatility index's (VIX) 30 percent drop from recent peaks is a clear positive for riskier assets. But if 2008 is any guide, its decline may not yet signal the market trough. In 2008, the VIX retreated from highs in October, but markets took another five months to bottom out.

The recession in 2008 was a long one—some economists reckon this time a turnaround in global growth will come by the third quarter. Yet some also warn that markets are only now coming to grips with how severe a potential downturn could be.—Reuters

Business

China's factories reopen, only to fire workers as virus shreds global trade

Millions in China forecast to lose jobs, get pay cuts

BEIJING: Shi Xiaomin, who used to export suits and blazers by the thousands to South Korea, the Netherlands and the United States, was luckier than many other Chinese factory owners.

When his factory in the eastern city of Wenzhou reopened last month after an extended shutdown due to the coronavirus outbreak, the local government sent a bus to a nearby province to ferry back more than 20 of his stranded workers. Staff with cars volunteered to fetch colleagues. Shi's optimism was short-lived.

In the past week, requests to cancel orders or delay shipments from his European and US

clients have flooded in. Early in the outbreak, China imposed tough travel restrictions and factory suspensions to curb the spread of the virus, squeezing labor supplies and sending exporters scrambling to fulfil orders.

Now, the reverse is happening - overseas orders are being scrapped as the pandemic ravages the economies of China's trading partners. "The unprecedented shutdown of normal



Factories face prospect of plunging overseas orders

economic activity across Europe, the US and a growing number of emerging markets is certain to cause a dramatic contraction in Chinese exports, probably in the range of a 20-45 percent year-on-year drop in the second quarter," said Thomas Gatley, senior analyst at research firm Gavekal Dragonomics.

Shi said his fabric supplier in hard-hit Italy suspended operations on Sunday, meaning no fresh raw materials from May. His stockpile of fabric will last until the end of April.

Shi said he would slow production and might suspend all output soon if business does not improve.

He also told the 50-odd workers who have yet to return from Hubei province, the epicenter of the outbreak in China, to find jobs elsewhere. "We know this year is bad and next year would be better, but the question is how many factories can make it to next year?" Shi said.

Slumping exports

Economists had initially anticipated a V-shaped recovery for China's economy, similar



WUHAN: An employee working on an air conditioner production line at a Midea factory in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province on Wednesday. —AFP

to that seen after SARS epidemic in 2003. But analysts have since slashed their forecasts to levels not seen since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. China's net exports accounted for 11 percent of economic growth last year.

"The last overseas orders we received were

for April," said Zhu Hongping, chairman of Hangzhou Hongli Food, a supplier of precooked food to restaurants in Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Normally, at this time of the year, orders can stretch to June and July, Zhu said, adding he may have to suspend production in three months. —Reuters

US must refrain from export curbs: Commerce body

WASHINGTON: The US Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday urged the United States to refrain from adopting export controls or other measures that could impede the movement of medicines and other essential goods needed to combat the coronavirus pandemic. The chamber said it welcomed a joint pledge issued Wednesday by Australia, Canada and other countries to keep supply chains open and avoid export controls, and urged Washington to follow suit.

"To date, the US has laudably refrained from imposing export controls on these goods, and we urge the United States to continue to avoid such measures, which would immediately undermine US-based production of medical supplies," Chamber Executive Vice President Myron Brilliant said in a statement.

There are growing concerns about protectionist measures being discussed or adopted as countries scramble to respond to the virus. The Group of Seven advanced economies on Tuesday raised concerns about potential global supply chain disruptions, and the issue will be addressed by leaders of the Group of 20 largest economies when they hold a virtual summit yesterday. —Reuters

Airbus unions in Spain against production restart

MADRID: Unions representing Airbus workers in Spain on Wednesday condemned its decision to resume production despite the coronavirus pandemic, saying it endangered the health of employees, with 138 of them already infected. GCT, the minority union, called for Airbus workers to begin an indefinite strike on March 30 to protest the restart of production on Monday in Spain, where the company builds part of the tail section of its aircraft and assembles A400M military planes.

"The company must understand that the occupational health of its workers is not a game," the union said in a tweet. The aerospace sector is not an "essential and strategic" industry that must remain open during a health emergency, the union had already argued in a statement on Monday.

Spain's coronavirus death toll on Wednesday overtook that of China, where the virus originated late last year, rising to 3,434. Only Italy now has a higher death toll. Spain declared a state of emergency on March 14 to try to curb the spread of the virus, which bans people from leaving home except for essential outings. Airbus's majority union in Spain, the CCOO, has so far not joined the strike call, but it also demanded that production stop at the company's eight plants across the country which employ around 13,000 people.

"Management wants production to return to normal gradually... we feel that during a state of emergency, that can't happen

because it is not possible to adopt all the safety measures needed to protect the health of workers," the CCOO delegate who represents Airbus workers, Francisco San Jose, told AFP. According to a tally provided by Airbus management to unions on Tuesday, a total of 138 employees of the firm are infected with the virus and another 820 are in isolation as a precaution.

Fear

"We don't understand how there could be normal activity in certain areas, especially in the Madrid region" which has been the hardest hit by the outbreak, San Jose said.

Many Airbus workers were taking holidays this week because they were afraid to come in to work, he added. If the Airbus plants are used to make ventilators or face masks needed to fight the virus, the company "can count on us and we will work as much as possible," San Jose said.

The two unions called for members to donate their industrial masks and other protective gear which they use on the assembly line to hospitals at a time when such medical supplies are lacking for health care workers in Spain. Contacted by AFP, Airbus confirmed in a statement that "several" of its employees in Spain were infected but declined to confirm the figure given by the unions because it said the situation "changes quickly".

The company said new strict health and safety measures were adopted when its plants were closed and production was re-organized so employees can remain at least one metre (yard) away from each other. Spanish work inspectors visited three of its plants in the Madrid region either "in person or virtually" and found no reason for them to be closed, Airbus added. In neighboring France, workers also greeted the company's decision to resume production with reluctance. —AFP

Sports

Triathlon champion Brownlee to extend Olympic career after Tokyo delay

Ex-cycling world champ Valverde aiming for postponed Tokyo Games

LONDON: Double Olympic triathlon champion Alistair Brownlee confirmed Wednesday that he will defend his title at the Tokyo Games after they were postponed until 2021. Britain's Brownlee, 31, is planning to switch from short course events to 'Ironman' races following the Olympics in Japan, which were originally scheduled to start on July 24 but will now take place no later than summer next year following Tuesday's decision to push back the event. "Tokyo 2020 would have 100 percent been my last short distance race, and I am now going to have to extend it for another year," Brownlee told the UK's Press Association.

Gold medallist in London in 2012 and in Rio four years later, Brownlee was training with medal-winning brother Jonny in New Mexico, USA when he

heard about the delay. "The logical conclusion is that it will be more difficult because I will be another year older. But you never know what is going to happen in a year in endurance sport," added Brownlee, who is the only triathlete to have claimed back-to-back gold medals at the Olympics.

"It is going to be a challenge but there are a lot of people in a far worse position than me. "The Olympics are an inspirational thing, but when people are in hospital losing their lives, it seems inappropriate if any of those resources

are being put into a sporting event."

Earlier, former road cycling world champion Alejandro Valverde revealed Wednesday that he wants to take part in next year's postponed 2020 Olympics despite turning 41 in 2021.

Valverde, who will celebrate his 40th birthday next month, announced in February that he would be retiring at the end of the 2021 season, making the yet-to-be-rescheduled Tokyo Games one of his last chances for a major honour. "If the Games finally take place in the summer of 2021, if everything goes well and I'm still in good shape, I will go, even if I'll be 41 and everything will obviously be more complicated," Valverde said in a video published by his team Movistar on Twitter. "If the selectors pick me, I'll go there to give my best." The 2009 Vuelta a Espana winner has never won an Olympic medal despite participating three times, in 2004, 2008 and 2012. He is currently in isolation at his home in Spain, one of the countries worst-hit by the COVID-19 outbreak. On Wednesday Spain joined Italy in seeing its number of deaths overtake China, with fatalities surging to 3,434. Cycling is on hold until at least the end of April as the world grapples with a virus that has taken the lives of over 20,000 people and left more than three billion living under lockdown. — AFP

“ I’ll go there to give my best ”



Alejandro Valverde

How rugby players keep busy during lockdown

PARIS: From perfecting pizza dough to fermenting tea, rugby players in Europe have found different ways to pass their time during the lockdown forced by the coronavirus pandemic.

Australia international Scott Higginbotham, who plays for Bordeaux-Begles, has been busy in his kitchen during the confinement period which started in France on March 17.

"My wife and I take turns in going out and doing a bit of exercise and a lot of cooking. Every meal is made from scratch," Higginbotham told AFP this week. "I made my own pizza dough the other day which was quite nice. I do love pizza so that was a big one for me going forward. "I made a chili con carne on Monday which was pretty good if I don't mind saying so myself," he added.

New Zealand-born Dean Budd plays for Treviso in northern Italy where people have been confined to their homes for more than two weeks due to COVID-19. "I've made some nice pickled eggplant, that was my go-to. I tried to make some fermented hot sauce, but that failed," Budd told AFP. "I'm brewing kombucha (fermented tea) so that keeps me busy as well. The problem with fermentation is time so I'm wanting to taste them and staring at them wanting them to go faster because I've got nothing else to do," he added.

Second-row Budd, who has 29 caps for the Azzurri, lives in an apartment with partner and lifestyle blogger Amelia Rogers and said keeping fit has been difficult. "There's only a certain access to things and only so much you can do with your creative mind by lifting tables, hanging off tables and running up and down stairs. It's very challenging to stay active," he added.

MBANDA THE MAN

Budd's Italy team-mate Maxime Mbanda has become a volunteer ambulance driver in the city of Parma during the outbreak.

"He's always been a real team man. He's always put his body on



PARIS: Bordeaux-Begles' Scott Higginbotham has honed his culinary skills during the coronavirus lockdown in France.

the line but he's now putting it on the line for different reasons," Budd said. "What Max has done is awesome and symbolises what a rugby player is about. Giving to the greater good," he added.

For Racing 92 coach Mike Prendergast in Paris the task of keeping in touch with work is different. "It's a tricky one because there is no day-to-day training or games to analyse. What I've been doing is working off my laptop, looking at our games throughout the year, little areas we can get better at," he told AFP. "There's not much more you can do as coaches. You can't even plan ahead because you don't know what's going to happen," he added.

The French Top 14 and the Pro14, which Budd's Treviso compete in, are both postponed without a restart date. Higginbotham, who won the last of his 34 Wallabies caps in 2017, called for a training period of up to a month before matches take place again.

"There's definitely going to need to be a few weeks of re-conditioning before they think about playing games. That's without question," he said. "Three to four weeks would be enough to get us back to game playing weight," he added.—AFP

Turkish boxers get coronavirus

LONDON: The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been accused of irresponsibility after two Turkish boxers and a trainer caught the coronavirus during a qualifying event in London this month.

According to the Turkish Boxing Federation website, athlete Serhat Guler and trainer Seyfullah Dumlupinar contracted the virus at the European qualifying tournament.

"While the world was taking extreme measures to deal with the virus, I am baffled that an IOC taskforce and the British government allowed the tournament to start even though many of us had concerns and almost every other sport had shut down," federation President Eyup Gozgec was quoted as saying in the Guardian.

London's Copper Box arena hosted the official Olympic qualifying tournament, featuring boxers from 40 nations. It continued for three days despite virtually every other sport being suspended because of the pandemic.

In a letter to other boxing federations, seen by the Guardian, Gozgec, who is also vice-president of the European Boxing Confederation, said: "Unfortunately, two of our athletes and our Turkish head coach have tested positive for the new type Covid-19 coronavirus after returning to Turkey from London.

"All of them are in treatment now and thankfully they are in good condition. This is the disastrous result of the irresponsibility of the IOC taskforce. "This virus has been around since December 2019. Therefore, it is inevitable to ask why the European qualification event was not postponed before it took place?"

"They did not consider anyone's health, which led them to organise this horrible event." — Reuters

Sports

Six stars for whom Olympics in 2021 may come too late

Serena will be 40 in September next year

PARIS: With the 2020 Olympics postponed until 2021, there are fears the delay will shatter the gold medal hopes of many ageing athletes.

AFP Sport looks at six evergreen stars for whom a delayed Tokyo Games might be a step too far.

ROGER FEDERER

The 20-time Grand Slam champion, who will be 40 in August 2021, won Olympic gold when he partnered Stan Wawrinka to the men's doubles title at the 2008 Beijing Games. Federer was a quarter-finalist in singles in China, silver medallist in 2012 in London before injury forced him skip the 2016 Games in Rio.

In Sydney, in 2000, Federer made the semi-finals in singles but he still remembers Australia fondly as it was the

place where he first started his romance with Mirka Vavrinec, who is now his wife. "Overall it was probably the most unbelievable Olympics I ever had," said Federer, who was also Switzerland's flag-bearer in Beijing and in Athens in 2004 where he exited in the second round.

SERENA WILLIAMS

The US great will be 40 in September next year although her desire to play in Tokyo might not be as pressing as that of Federer.

Williams already has four Olympic gold medals — singles at London in 2012 and women's doubles with sister Venus in 2000, 2008 in Beijing and London four years later.

The sisters lost their opening round match in

Rio in 2016 while Serena's gold medal defence in the singles was ended by Elina Svitolina in the third round.

TIGER WOODS

Woods, who will be 46 in December next year, would have struggled to make the US team for the Games if they had remained in their 2020 slot. He is currently only the sixth-ranked American with just the top four guaranteed to make the squad. Woods, the winner of 15 majors, has been fighting a recurrence of a back injury so at least the delay to 2021 for the Olympics gives him renewed hope of a golden swansong.

Organisers would be desperate for Woods to play after he missed the return of golf at the 2016 Games in Rio due to injury.

LIN DAN

The colourful and controversial Chinese badminton superstar will be 37 by the time the next Games roll around. Lin already has gold from Beijing in 2008 and London four years later, adding to his five world titles. However, there is a hint of unfinished business for Lin who was defeated in the bronze medal match in Rio in 2016 having been downed in the semi-finals by great rival Lee Chong Wei, the man he had beaten in the 2008 and 2012 Olympic finals.

ALLYSON FELIX

The only female track and field athlete in history to win six Olympic gold medals, Felix had spent the last two years preparing for a golden farewell at the Tokyo Olympics.



Allyson Felix

Felix, who turns 35 at the end of this year, will be racing against Father Time as she attempts to improve her medal tally in what will be her fifth consecutive Olympics appearance.

The American star can take comfort from the fact she is by no means the oldest woman to chase Olympic glory in sprint events. Merlene Ottey was 40 when she anchored Jamaica's 4x100m relay team to a bronze medal in 2000.

JUSTIN GATLIN

Gatlin had planned to retire in 2020 after competing in his fourth Olympics at the age of 38. However the controversial American star now plans to extend his career in order to compete in the rescheduled Tokyo Games.

"I think a lot of people think that time is

against me or against older athletes in this situation, and it's far from the truth," said Gatlin, who has twice served suspensions for drug offences during his career. Gatlin, the 2004 Olympic champion, though could face a battle to even qualify given the depth of the US men's sprinting squad, with Christian Coleman and Noah Lyles the favourites in the 100m and 200m.

BUT PLENTY OF TIME FOR THIS PAIR

Syrian table tennis player Hend Zaza was set to become the youngest athlete at the Tokyo Olympics - at just 11 years old.

She would not have been alone in Japan as professional skateboarder Sky Brown - only five months older - was hoping to compete for Great Britain. — AFP

Stokes preparing for IPL despite virus shutdown

LONDON: England all-rounder Ben Stokes says he is preparing to play in the Indian Premier League, even though he knows the tournament is unlikely to go ahead. Stokes has signed to play for Rajasthan Royals and is one of 13 English players set to feature in the IPL.

But the Twenty20 tournament has already been delayed until April 15 in response to the pandemic and India entered a three-week lockdown in a bid to contain the spread on Wednesday. "At the moment my next competi-

itive cricket is going to be in the IPL," Stokes told the BBC on Wednesday.

"That hasn't changed yet so I have to think I will be playing on April 20." Last week, the England and Wales Cricket Board announced that the English county season would not start until at least the end of May, while England's tour of Sri Lanka was also postponed due to the virus.

With IPL chiefs yet to call off or further delay their event, Stokes has to continue to keep himself in shape to play in the unlikely event he is asked to travel to India. "I have to get my head round that I am playing even though in the back of my mind I know I am probably not," he added.

"I have to build up and get myself physically in a position that if it does happen I am good to go. "I cannot take three weeks off and expect the body to be ready for April 20 be-

cause it doesn't work like that. It might happen and if it does I don't want to be behind.

"There will be a lot of advice given to us and if it was an option to go we will have to take the sensible one." Stokes said England's players were initially shocked when the two-Test Sri Lanka tour was cancelled.

But the 28-year-old is well aware it was the right thing to do in the circumstances. "Everyone was shell-shocked for half an hour in the changing room. It was such a weird feeling because we had been there for 10-12 days. We were building up to the first Test and then we were going home," Stokes said.

"But when you put everything together in terms of where the world was with the coronavirus, and what was being said on tour, it was the wrong place to be at that time and everyone's health is more important than anything else in the world." —AFP



Ben Stokes

Sports

Rescheduled Tokyo Olympics need sacrifices from all stakeholders

IOC's role was 'to make the Olympic dreams of athletes come true': Bach

LAUSANNE: International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach said Wednesday that the postponed Tokyo Games would require "sacrifices and compromises" from all sides to make them work.

"These postponed Olympic Games will need sacrifices, will need compromises by all of the stakeholders," Bach told reporters in a conference call the day after the IOC decided to delay the 2020 Games because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The IOC's role, Bach said, was "to make the Olympic dreams of athletes come true". He admitted that cancelling the Tokyo Games was "discussed and considered", but said: "It was very clear from the beginning that cancellation was not something the IOC would in any way favour." It is the first Olympic Games in peacetime to be postponed. Bach said the rescheduling of the Games in 2021 remained a "very challenging question".

A taskforce, named 'Here We Go', had been created to examine the issue, Bach added, saying

the first port of call would be with the 33 international federations, likely starting with a conference call on Thursday.

"The first step, we have to see with them, to see what the options are. We also have to take into account the sports calendar around the Olympic Games," the German said.

The rescheduling, he added, "is not restricted just to the summer months. All the options are on the table, before and including the summer of 2021". Both World Athletics and the International Swimming Federation say they are prepared to move their 2021 world championships to accommodate the rescheduled Games.

The Athletics world championships are due to be held in Eugene, Oregon on August 6-15 next year, with the swimming worlds at Fukuoka in Japan between July 16 and August 1.

One of the many logistical headaches caused by the historic postponement of the Tokyo Olympics has been the uncertainty around the Athletes' Village overlooking Tokyo Bay.

Touted by developers as a "flagship neigh-

bourhood for urban lifestyles", the buildings housing the 11,000 competitors were to be hastily repurposed into more than 4,000 condos with stunning city views, some carrying a price tag of 170 million yen (\$1.5 million).

When asked about how a postponement might affect the Village and its conversion, Bach said: "I cannot tell you what the situation is."

"It's one of the many thousand of questions the taskforce has to address. 'It's the Olympic Village (where) the heart of the Games is usually beating.'"

Bach, who was part of West Germany's gold medal-winning foil fencing team at the 1976 Olympics, added: "Of course, I'd be very, very delighted if we could have the Olympic Village in the traditional form."

"Everybody who has once lived in an Olympic Village knows that this is the real Olympic experience, that this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. 'Living under one roof with the whole world, sharing your meals together, celebrating together, discussing together, and form-



IOC President Thomas Bach

ing this unique Olympic unity."

Bach concluded by saying: "We are at an unprecedented situation and have an unprecedented challenge. 'We have to find the best possible situation under the circumstances that we are living in.'" — AFP

British rowing stars reset after Olympic let-down

LONDON: British Olympic rower Polly Swann was counting down to Tokyo 2020 just days ago. Now she is considering starting her medical career early to help in the battle against the coronavirus. The 31-year-old, who won a silver medal as part of the women's eight at the 2016 Games in Rio, was looking to go one better in Japan before beginning her new life on the hospital wards.

Swann said this week's decision to postpone the Olympics at least gives athletes clarity after weeks of uncertainty.

The former Edinburgh University student was gearing up to start her foundation programme as a doctor after competing in Japan but she said there were rumours that health chiefs in Scotland could be looking for reinforcements in the next few weeks as COVID-19 takes hold.

"I think I need to make some hard choices," said Swann, who was in a good position to win a place in the women's four.

"The Olympics are my dream and something very personal to me. I want to go and win an Olympic gold medal but also the pressure we're under globally is much bigger than just sport."

"Obviously medicine is a huge passion to me so I feel passionate about having a duty, being a tiny cog in the NHS machine."

The former world and European champion described the postponement of the Games as frustrating but said it meant athletes now had an extra year to prepare to hit their peak.

And she has not given up on her dream, saying the National Health Service is generally supportive of doctors who want to compete at the Olympics.



AVIS: File photo shows Britain's Jo Wratten (L) and Polly Swann warm up on the rowing machine ergo ahead of a test at a GB Rowing Team pre-Olympic 2020 training camp in Avis, central Portugal on February 12, 2020. — AFP

But she admitted: "It will be tough. I had the perfect solution."

Medical student Imogen Grant, a lightweight sculler, is also coming to terms with having to rejig her plans but remains firmly focused on Tokyo next year.

The Cambridge University student, who was due to restart her medical studies shortly after the end of the Olympics after a two-year hiatus, said the change of dates had not dimmed her desire.

"I had a few hours where I threw the toys out of the pram but ultimately the reason I wanted to be on the GB team was I wanted to go to the Olympics and win a medal," she said. "That dream hasn't changed." Grant, 24, is relatively new to the sport. She fell into rowing at the start of her university career at Cambridge, attracted by the lure of free drinks as a reward for signing up to a club taster session. She is hoping she can negotiate another year off before she dives back into her medical degree.

Swann and Grant are both training at home now after the closure of the British rowing team's Caversham training base near London on Saturday as a result of the coronavirus.—AFP

Football training in the age of COVID-19

MIAMI: Inter Miami captain Luis Robles never imagined his first few months in South Florida would be like this.

Two weeks ago, the veteran Major League Soccer goalkeeper had been preparing to lead David Beckham's new franchise into their first ever home game.

But 48 hours before that eagerly awaited landmark fixture against the LA Galaxy on March 14, the coronavirus pandemic brought the US sports world to a standstill.

It has left Robles and his team-mates in limbo, unable to train properly and in the dark over when the season may resume. With MLS facilities shuttered, Robles and his team-mates have been required to improvise in order to stay fit.

"It's an unprecedented situation and it's really tough at times to find a place to train but the most important thing is to continue to follow the guidelines from health officials," Robles said during a conference call on Wednesday.

"We all have been finding time in the day to carve out the training regimen given to us. Most of it is running and then a couple of days a week there is a strength portion."

"You can do that at home. I don't have weights but one of the examples used when it comes to resistance training is filling up a gallon milk jug and using that as a weight. I have done that for some of the exercises so it is a creative way to do the training." Luckily for Robles, some of his team-mates live near him in the Florida suburbs so pounding the streets hasn't seemed like such a chore.—AFP

British rowing stars reset after Olympic let-down

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AVIS: File photo shows Britain's Polly Swann poses for a portrait at a GB Rowing Team pre-Olympic 2020 training camp in Avis, central Portugal on February 12, 2020. — AFP