


Friday Times

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RAMADAN 8, 1441 AH | FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2020



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Local

Are UFOs real?



Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

muna@kuwaittimes.net

This year does not seem promising so far for the inhabitants of Planet Earth. January sparked global military disputes, and with February, the world came in confrontation with a new virus that infects humans. The coronavirus has several names, but no one seems to be able to determine its source or the fate of humans.

I think it may remain a puzzle for a long time until its genetic code is completely deciphered and a vaccine is found. So we are now in the phase of coping with the virus and dealing with infections as they happen. The situation is bad for the world economy and the lives of millions of people.

But humans are great in adapting. A new topic has appeared and it is indeed a juicy one for many people including children. It's about UFOs - unidentified flying objects. When we were kids, we used to watch old series about UFOs, and many of us believed that they were just a myth of entertainment. But there are assurances this time that perhaps what we thought was a subject of humor is a matter of concern to humans.

On Monday, the Pentagon released three declassified videos that show US navy pilots encountering unidentified flying objects. The three videos show what the pilots saw during training flights in 2004 and 2015. Two of the videos were published by the New York Times in 2017. The Pentagon says the videos depict "unexplained aerial phenomena that remain characterized as 'unidentified'".

The Pentagon said it released the footage "to clear up any misconceptions by the public on whether or not the footage that has been circulating was real, or whether or not there is more to the videos", a statement on the Department of Defense website said. The publications have sparked renewed interest in what the US military has learned from the videos and whether they are evidence of UFOs.

This phenomenon has occupied the world over the past decades. The latest news also attracted the attention of the world and all people, confirming that what we believed was a myth could be a reality and that explanations were incomplete. The release of the videos by the Pentagon adds to the legitimacy of the videos and will provoke speculations that humans have recently interacted with extraterrestrials.

Public reaction to the videos was varied. Hundreds of people have spoken about seeing flying saucers hurtling through the sky very quickly, but none of them have specified what these dishes were. There were others who claimed to be kidnapped by aliens and returned to Earth, something that many people did not believe, but perhaps what they said was the truth! Or maybe there is a battle in space and we are just a small planet, as we have often seen in many movies.

Also, many of us remember movies and stories about what has been called Area 51 - the secret US military facility. But how many of these stories can and should be taken as fact and possibly a future threat? Former Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada tweeted about the three videos, saying the footage "only scratches the surface of research and materials available".

The excitement of the mysterious UFOs created various waves of confusion and controversy among the people, maybe because right now we are on a different warfront and we are not completely done with it yet. I personally think that we only know very little of what is really going on on other planets, and UFOs maybe are not a total fiction.

Stay home and stay healthy.

PHOTO OF THE DAY



KUWAIT: In this archive photo, a stray cat looks on the camera as a woman is seen in the background sitting by the beach in Sharq. The lockdown forced by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has deprived people in Kuwait of the chance to enjoy this year's spring. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

The elderly: A hidden blessing



IN MY VIEW

By Abdellatif Sharaa

local@kuwaittimes.com

The Arab tradition has always respected the elderly, and more precisely, the young always respected those older than them. In fact, many societies around the world have a special respect for seniors. Islam insists on respecting the elderly in several chapters in the Holy Quran and gave special attention to parents, as in the verse: And We have enjoined upon man [care] for his parents. His mother carried him, [increasing her] in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents; to Me is the [final] destination". (31:14).

So, it is a must that we give the elderly their due respect and treat them well regardless of who they are, be they relatives, neighbors or even strangers, because one day we will be in their shoes and we will be seeking the same, and if we do not give respect now, we will not get it later. A message on social media spoke about the elderly and it was titled "the elderly - the hidden blessing", and I would like to share some of it because it is true and touching:

The elderly have lost much of their youth, vitality and physical health, as well as life's fuses. They have lost their parents and many of their friends and companions; their hearts are aching and they are hiding much sadness. The elderly are no longer the focus of family and homes, as they were earlier, so we must be careful with them.

It is true that the elderly may seem asleep, but in truth they are just laying down. They may eat but do not digest. You see them laughing, but they are not happy and may hide their tears behind a smile. They can be in pain if you stay away from them, and even if you are preoccupied with other things while being with them.

The elderly need those who listen to them and seem to be happy with their presence. Their needs are much more than just food, drinks, clothes and medicine! They need to see you smiling to them, hear comforting words and a mind that is happy to see them. You should remember that the elderly swing back to memories of the past, which is behind them, and to a future that may not come, and here we must remember that they have an emptiness that needs wise people to fill.

The elderly include the father, mother, grandfather, grandmother and other relatives whose hairs have turned grey and their feelings have become rigid. Make them live happy days and bright nights, and let them turn the last page of the book in the comfort of being respected and in happiness, and this in turn will not make you regret your actions after they are gone.

They are the elderly now, and they will go, and soon enough you will be elderly, so look at what you may plant, because you will harvest it later. Please, take care of the elderly, because simply, they deserve it!



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Local



HOME GARDENING BLOOMING AMID COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

By Chidi Emmanuel

As the coronavirus wreaks havoc across the globe, some residents in Kuwait are turning to gardening - to ease the boredom caused by the lockdown, and for others, to cut expenses as austerity measures begin to bite. Amid a scarcity and rise in the prices of fruits and vegetables, some residents are resorting to supplementary gardening to ease the burden. While some do it for fun, others see it as a way to augment what they have.

With the lockdowns and curfew, people are

also looking for activities to occupy their free time. Parents too are turning to gardening as an outdoor activity to do with their children who are stuck at home after schools were shut. "Planting vegetables can be quite a revelation to a child," said Charles Edward, an African resident. Gardeners without yards are even planting in trash bags, buckets and pots. For Charles, buckets and trash bags are enough for planting vegetables. "I'm not really bored - I keep myself busy watering my plants. It makes me happy. It is actually a form of exercise for me," he explained.



From Fouad Al-Shaikh's garden.

Local

Friday, May 1, 2020



Educative for the kids

With so many digging into gardening for the first time, there has been a push to exchange ideas. "The fact that we can grow edible stuff in a limited space is gratifying; I was motivated when I saw a post by an acquaintance on a WhatsApp group about how he was growing various vegetables on his terrace in Riggae. Right now, we have some pots of capsicum, chili, lettuce and tomato. It is not a classic garden - just a few pots in our small balcony," Indian oral surgeon Dr Shaikhan Reshamwala told Kuwait Times. "Because of the small quantity, it is basically just the pleasure we get by looking at the plants. Also, it is fascinating and educative for the kids," Dr Shaikhan added.

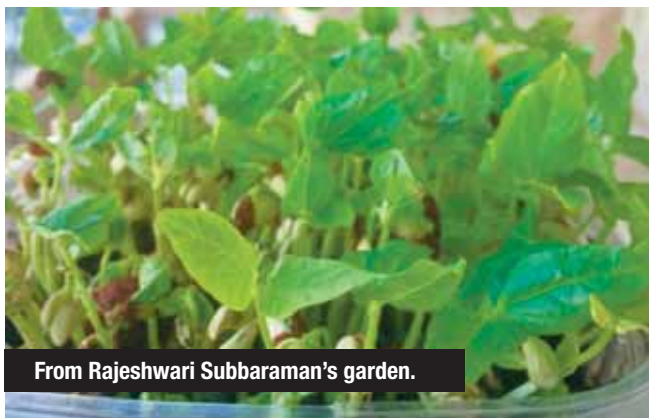


Gardening may be a rare positive trend to emerge from the crippling pandemic. For Fouad Al-Shaikh, a photographer who has planted corn, beans, tomatoes, potatoes, onions and mushrooms, it is something worth doing. "I used an empty spot at my workplace to do my gardening. Apart from the fun, the harvest is good and encouraging," he said.

Beautiful lessons

"With its many kinds of anxieties, COVID-19 has brought several beautiful lessons to the human race as well. One eye-opener happened during an online teaching session. In the midst of all the turbulences, my students and I were pondering over Emily Dickenson's 'There is Another Sky' and were trying to read beyond the lines. Brilliant thoughts were exchanged virtually. And it was at this point that an idea struck my mind. Why do I need to worry so much about vegetables?" Rajeshwari Subbaraman, an Indian lecturer wondered as she narrated how she started planting vegetables.

"I cleaned up my gardening pots and picked up a dozen trays that had been sitting there staring at the blank wall. So far my balcony is now decorated with cilantro, mint, potatoes, chili, melons and tomatoes under the warm sunshine. It gives me immense joy as I sing my own tunes to them and see them grow and flourish day by day. The sprouts are part of my diet and a saving grace to a core vegetarian like me who is eating home-grown organic vegetables. The testing time has taught me to connect more romantically with 'the green' and enjoy its beauty," she added excitedly.



From Rajeshwari Subbaraman's garden.



From Dr Shaikhan Reshamwala's garden.



Local

Zain sponsors QDWA with Sheikh Fahad Al-Kandari

Company keen on supporting cultural and Islamic programs during Holy Month

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its main sponsorship of QDWA, a cultural and Islamic show hosted by Imam of Kuwait's Grand Mosque Sheikh Fahad Al-Kandari. The show airs daily on Kuwait TV and YouTube during the holy month of Ramadan, and features English subtitles for non-Arabic speakers.

Zain supported this show as part of its keenness on diversifying the content of its annual Ramadan campaign to include cultural and Islamic programs throughout the holy month. The company is also keen on supporting national efforts and ideas in all areas, including cultural aspects that introduce noble Islamic values in a unique and inventive way.

QDWA mainly aims at showcasing and discussing many Islamic values learned from the story of the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, in a unique way. Such values include dispraising anger, the status of women in Islam, dispraising strictness in Islam, the power of the Holy Quran, human rights in Islam, and much more.

The show was filmed in various locations

from the life of Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, throughout Makkah and Madinah. The show also features interviews, filmed in London, Birmingham, Jordan, and Kuwait, with people who were personally touched by the values discussed. Moreover, the show features quick interviews with members of the Arab public in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait.

Zain's Corporate Sustainability and Social



Featuring
English
subtitles

Responsibility campaign during the holy month of Ramadan includes an array of humanitarian and cultural programs, with the aim of celebrating the true spirit the holy month brings and helping less fortunate people enjoy Ramadan happily.



KUWAIT: Al-Najat Charitable Society workers prepare food baskets to be distributed to people in need in Kuwait during Ramadan, and help them cope with the difficult situation due to the coronavirus' spread. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait Times

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Local

Third phase of Kuwaiti citizens' repatriation plan ends in success

Citizens brought on 32 flights from different cities around the world

KUWAIT: The third phase of Kuwaiti citizens' repatriation plan successfully ended on Wednesday, part of an operation to bring back nationals amidst spread of the novel coronavirus. Kuwait Airways and Jazeera Airways operated 32 flights during the third phase to cities in the Arabian Gulf countries, and Western capitals. The two airliners operated 12 flights to London, eight to Manchester, three to New York, three to Glasgow, and two flights to each of Dublin and the Saudi city of Hael. One flight was operated to each of Moscow, Armenia, Kiev and Warsaw. The fourth phase starts today and will include 22 flights to US cities of Los Angeles, Miami, Dallas and Washington State, Canada's Montreal, Australia's Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, Singapore and Al-Najaf. The fourth phase will be operated by Kuwait Airways, Jazeera Airways, Etihad and Qatar Airways. The Foreign Ministry is leading the repatriation plan and had launched, on April 10, a website (<https://withyou.e.gov.kw>) for the citizens to register their information before they were repatriated. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Citizens emerge out of Kuwait International Airport upon arrival as part of the third phase of the state's repatriation plan. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

US commends Kuwait improvement of IR system

KUWAIT: The US on Wednesday commended Kuwait government's improvement in its Intellectual Property (IP) system, and enforcing relevant laws to protect rights of Kuwaiti entrepreneurs and innovative start-up companies. The US "commends the Kuwaiti government for making significant improvements to its intellectual property protection and enforcement regime," the US Embassy in Kuwait said in a statement. These improvements, it added, were recognized in the US Trade Representative's 2020 Special 301 report published on April 29, 2020. The Report is an annual study of global intellectual property protection and enforcement systems.

The 2020 report removes Kuwait from the Priority Watch List which is a "a very important achievement," it said. However, Kuwait remains on the Watch List as it continued to expand and improve its enforcement capabilities, said the embassy. The Kuwaiti government, led by the National Library, took concrete steps to reform its copyright regime last summer by passing the 2019 Copyright and Related Rights Law and Implementing Regulations. The report also recognizes significant and lasting initiatives by enforcement agencies in Kuwait to prevent the importation, distribution and sale of counterfeit and pirated goods.

In 2019, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry's Consumer Protection Department, Kuwait General Administration for Customs Intellectual Property Rights Unit and Ministry of Health's Drug and Food Control Department seized thousands of illicit and harmful counterfeit and pirated goods from markets, air and seaports, and illegal warehouses, noted the Embassy. It said it continued to support the Kuwaiti government in its efforts to enhance capabilities to protect and enforce intellectual property rights, including for Kuwaiti entrepreneurs and innovative start-up companies. It called for guarding against the dangers of using counterfeit or sub-standard products, which could jeopardize health of public at a time the country was fighting coronavirus and guarantee safety of workers, while also appreciating government agencies' fight against importation, distribution and sale of fake goods. — KUNA

PM receives new Commerce Chamber chief



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets with Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry Chairman Mohammad Al-Saqer and board members. — KUNA

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah received on Wednesday Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) Chairman Mohammad Al-Saqer and board members.

His Highness the Prime Minister congratulated the visitors on the board's newly-acquired formation and leadership, underlining the vital role the body plays in supporting the national economy. The talks were also

attended by Minister of Commerce and Industry Khaled Al-Roudhan, Minister of Social Affairs, State Minister for Economic Affairs Maryam Al-Aqeel and Finance Minister Barrak Al-Sheetan. — KUNA

Kuwait imports medical supplies from China

KUWAIT: A Kuwaiti Air Force plane carrying medical equipment and supplies to help in fight against coronavirus, returned home from China Wednesday, the Ministry of Defense said. This flight is part of coordination between the Ministries of Defense and Health in order to provide necessary medical supplies, the ministry added in a statement. Kuwait Air Force operated an air corridor to bring the medical supplies from China, it said. — KUNA



Three arrested for defying lockdown

KUWAIT: Policemen arrested three people while trying to sneak out of Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, which has been under lockdown to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), the Ministry of Interior said Wednesday. Patrolmen spotted three persons trying to sneak out of the area in defiance of the lockdown, it added in a statement. The three persons, who were not carrying personal identification, were arrested and taken for questioning, it said. — KUNA

Local

Health ministry denies reports about Chinese team

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The ministry of health yesterday categorically denied reports about recommendations made by a visiting Chinese medical team regarding ramping up efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic. Local media and at least one senior lawmaker said that the Chinese team has recommended to declare total curfew in the country and a lockdown on 10 residential areas in order to contain the spread of the deadly disease.

The reports said the recommendations were made after site visits made by the Chinese team including a visit to Jaber hospital where a majority of coronavirus cases are being treated. But the ministry said the reports are "totally untrue" and denied the team has made any recommendations, adding that the team has not even visited the Jaber Hospital.

Spokesman for the ministry Abdullah Al-Sanad said the Chinese team yesterday paid a visit to the operation of an application made by the ministry to monitor Kuwaitis who are at house quarantines after returning from abroad. Sanad also said the team was scheduled to visit Jaber Hospital yesterday and reiterated his denial of the reports.

'Lack of planning'

But prominent opposition MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri challenged the ministry to publish the report submitted by the Chinese team which he claimed has "angered the ministry and exposed its lack of planning and blunders at the Jaber Hospital.

Muwaizri also accused the ministry of focusing on a media show rather than trying to safeguard the lives of the Kuwaiti people. The lawmaker said the Chinese team has recommended that all medical staff and workers entering Jaber Hospital must wear masks and gloves, sterilize hands and wear the full protective gear. Patients must wear face masks.

Muwaizri claimed that the team found that not all health workers observe the required distancing and discipline. The lawmaker also called on the health minister to visit the sites and listen to the complaints of health workers, adding that it is not a shame to make mistakes but the real shame is attempting a cover-up.

The new controversy comes up as the health ministry on Wednesday reported 300 new coronavirus cases, the largest number on a single day. Meanwhile, Health Minister Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced yesterday the recovery of 150 people from the coronavirus (COVID-19),

bringing the tally to 1,539. In remarks to KUNA, the minister said analyses and medical examinations and tests proved that these cases were cured of the coronavirus. The recovered will be transferred to the hospital recuperation ward, pending their discharge within the next few days, he said.

Trafficking probe

In the meantime, head of the national assembly human rights committee MP Adel Al-Damkhi yesterday said the panel will ask the national assembly to assign them to probe the trafficking in persons business in Kuwait.

He said the interior ministry has formed an investigation committee into the issue but the matter also involves other sides like the manpower authority, the central tenders committee who have a role to play in fighting against visa traders, in addition to ministries who award contracts.

Damkhi said that the interior ministry committee is not enough as the assembly must play its role. We will monitor the ministry committee but the assembly must get involved. The lawmaker said that visa trading is a big business in Kuwait and there are people who "manufacture" traffickers in persons, who get everything facil-



KUWAIT: Spokesman for the health ministry Abdullah Al-Sanad speaks during a daily briefing on COVID-19 developments in Kuwait in this file photo. — KUNA

itated like work permits, visas and exceptions. This is a network that imported the large numbers of marginal workers.

"All know that there are big heads and influential people behind this trade," Damkhi said, hinting at a key role for some officials. Meanwhile, the public prosecution is currently investigating into at least 12 visa trading cases involving around 65 suspects who are being accused of trafficking in persons, money laundering and violating residency and labor laws.

News in brief

More co-op staff test positive

KUWAIT: Al-Andalus and Riggae co-op society announced that two employees tested positive for the coronavirus. It added that the branch in block 9 would be closed for three days starting yesterday while workers in contact would be isolated. Meanwhile, an employee at Daiya co-op society tested positive for coronavirus, the co-op announced, adding that it would close starting yesterday until further notice.

No boundaries

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Social Affairs announced that people with special needs, elderly who hold priority cards, doctors, pharmacists, nursing staff, laboratory technicians, engineers, engineering assistants, paramedics, and administrators in the ministry of health who are working during the curfew hours are allowed to enter co-ops without being bound by any condition, such as the area of residence.

Oil price up

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by \$1.94 to \$13.66 pb Wednesday as opposed to \$11.72 pb the day before, said Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. Meanwhile, future contracts of the West Texas Intermediate went up \$2.27 to \$15.06 pb, the same case with the Brent crude, which went up \$2.08 to \$22.54 pb. — KUNA

Union calls for reopening fish market

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Kuwait Fishermen Union expressed concerns about the repercussions of the continued closure of fish markets in Sharq and Fahaheel, especially after complaints from customers about high prices and lack of availability of many types of fish in markets that were designated to buy fish from the main fish markets and sell them after vending stands in the main mar-

kets were closed.

The union asked the health and municipality ministers to reopen the Sharq and Fahaheel fish markets that are considered a lifeline not only for fishermen, but also for consumers, who used to get various types of fresh local fish. The union found it strange to not open the fish markets despite the opening of the fruit and vegetable markets and slaughterhouses, adding that this contributed to creating a black market and other markets that sell fish at higher prices because they are not bought from those allowed to enter the market.

The union said the closure of the market has affected many families financially, adding that there are over 160 vending stands at Sharq market and 45 in Fahaheel, and the closure has caused many problems for fishermen and vendors and deprived

them of much of their daily income. The consumer also suffers from the rise in prices and the loss of many local fish due to the lack of competition and closure of the fish markets and vending stands.

The union wants to assure consumers and fishermen that it is exerting efforts in contacting concerned authorities to reopen markets under the precautionary measures, adding that despite the letters the union sent to concerned authorities, no reply was received from the health ministry so far. The union asked Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah to consider the letter that was sent to the undersecretary 10 days ago and send his approval to the Municipality to reopen the market, bearing in mind that restaurants and supermarkets are open and sell fish, while the main source of fish is closed.

Interior Minister oversees KFSD operations

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Deputy Premier, Interior Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Anas Khaled Al-Saleh visited Kuwait Fire Services Department (KFSD) premises to oversee efforts to counter the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). He was received by KFSD Director General Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mikrad and other officials. Saleh was briefed on the KFSD's plan to support state departments, including the health ministry. A demonstration was also made regarding the works done by firefighters such as delivering medicine to patients at home, operating trucks' disinfection platforms at border outlets, and securing quarantine areas.





Bollywood mourns another star as Rishi Kapoor dies at 67

Pompeo slams Qatar, S Africa for taking Cuba doctors



BERLIN: Police stand in front of Al-Irschad Mosque during a raid yesterday after dozens of police and special forces stormed mosques and associations linked to Hezbollah in Bremen, Berlin, Dortmund and Muenster in the early hours of the morning. — AFP

Germany outlaws Hezbollah

German security forces raid mosques

BERLIN: Germany yesterday completely banned Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement from carrying out activities on its soil, as police raided mosques and venues linked to the group. Like the European Union, Germany had until now only outlawed Hezbollah's military wing while tolerating its political wing. But in a shift immediately welcomed by the United States and Israel, the German interior ministry said it now considered the entire movement a "Shiite terrorist organization".

"Hezbollah is a terrorist organization deemed responsible for numerous attacks and kidnappings worldwide," Interior Minister Horst Seehofer told Germany's Bild daily. The interior minister "has banned the operation of the group" in Germany with immediate effect, his spokesman tweeted. "Even in times of crisis the rule of law is upheld," he wrote. Raids were taking place in several places across the country, he added.

Dozens of police and special forces stormed mosques and associations linked to Hezbollah in Bremen, Berlin, Dortmund and Muenster in the early hours of the morning, German media re-

ported. The Al-Irschad mosque in Berlin was sealed off with at least 16 police vans parked outside, an AFP photographer saw. Masked police officers were seen walking in and out of the mosque. Although Hezbollah has no official presence in Germany, security forces estimate it has roughly a thousand members in the country.

They are thought to use Germany as a safe



Hezbollah now considered as a 'terrorist group'

haven to make plans, recruit sympathizers and raise funds, including through criminal activities. The group's "criminal activities and plans for attacks are also taking place on German soil," Seehofer told Bild. He also recalled that Hezbollah

has openly called for "the violent destruction" of the Israeli state. "It's part of our historic responsibility that we use all means under the rule of law to act against this," he said, in a nod to Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust during World War II.

'Significant step'

The United States and Israel have long designated Hezbollah as a terrorist group and urged allies to follow suit. US ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell welcomed Berlin's change in stance and called on "all European Union member states to take similar action".

In Jerusalem, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz praised what he called "a significant step in the global fight against terrorism." He too urged the European Union "to do the same." Britain outlawed Hezbollah's political wing last year, making membership of the Shiite movement or inviting support for it a crime. The decision followed outrage over the display of the Hezbollah flag, which features a Kalashnikov assault rifle, at pro-Palestinian demonstrations in London.

The mood began shifting in Germany too with parliament passing a resolution last December that urged the government to ban the group from operating in Germany altogether. The interior ministry's prohibition order means the group's supporters are no longer allowed to display Hezbollah symbols or hold gatherings, and that funds can be frozen. Hezbollah sympathizers had in recent years waved their flag at the anti-Israel Al-Quds rally that is controversially held in Berlin each year.

Hezbollah, which backs Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in the country's civil war, is seen by Israel as an Iranian proxy, seeking to extend the Islamic republic's military reach to the Jewish state's northern border. Israeli warplanes have carried out hundreds of air strikes in Syria over the past few years against what Israel says are Iranian and Hezbollah targets. Hezbollah was established in 1982 during Lebanon's civil war. It is now a major political party in the country, where it holds a majority in parliament along with its allies. Israel and Hezbollah also fought a 2006 war. — AFP

International

Senegal launches huge aid scheme amid coronavirus

888 lorries mobilized to transport provisions across the country

GUINAW-RAILS: A man in Senegal's coastal capital Dakar lifts a sack of rice onto a donkey cart, ready to take home much-needed essentials as coronavirus cases increase across the country. He is an early beneficiary of one of West Africa's biggest aid programs for softening the impact of coronavirus restrictions.

Senegal has shut its borders, banned travel between cities and imposed a strict dusk-to-dawn curfew in a bid to curb the contagion, also mandating mask-wearing in government and commercial sites. But 40 percent of the country's roughly 16 million people live in poverty, often working in precarious informal jobs, and the restrictions have hit them hard. Government-chartered lorries have been hauling supplies to the working-class Dakar suburb of Guinaw-Rails, where the first families received the aid on Tuesday.

Individual aid packages are lined up in the backyard of a cultural centre, each containing 100 kilos (220 pounds) of rice and 10 kilos of soap, as well as sugar, cooking oil and pasta. Some 60 people were at the pickup point on Tuesday out of about 3,200 people covered under the scheme in Guinaw-Rails, which lies beside a disused railway track some 20 kilometers from the centre. An official from the community development ministry on the scene said that the aid was being carefully

handed out to 30 households each time in order to maintain social distancing.

"Each household will be summoned at a specific time," he said. The government has mobilized 888 lorries to transport provisions to all corners of the country, in a scheme worth 69 million CFA francs (\$114 million, 105 million euros). Set to benefit are one million households, comprising a projected eight to 10 million people in total. Alongside the government handout, private companies, religious groups and local authorities are also making donations to struggling Senegalese.

'No salary'

Ami Sakho, a 37-year-old fishmonger who has not worked since the beginning of the outbreak, was among the first people to receive her package on Tuesday. "I can no longer leave (the house) because of this disease," she said, noting that she had eight children and a jobless polygamous husband. Sakho added she was pleased the "aid is going to the people in need", although many in the country have feared the resources would be siphoned off. Diarra Ndiaye, a school teacher of about 40, had also come to collect her provisions. "This aid will relieve us. My husband is a carpenter but now, he stops work earlier," she said, referring to the curfew.



YENE, Senegal: A man stands between food parcels during the launch of the distribution of food in the courtyard of the community hotel on April 28, 2020. — AFP

"We have no salary. I have six children with my husband, who has two wives," she added. Before the aid handout, reports of suspected corruption linked to the scheme were widespread on social media. But at a brief ceremony on Tuesday, Senegal's Community Development Minister Mansour

Faye dismissed the allegations, saying that the donations would proceed "by the book," and that he had received no complaints so far. "This is a very large operation, of great complexity," he said, while urging people to maintain social-distancing measures. — AFP

Tunisia's medics spending Ramadan in isolation

TUNIS: Amira Jamoussi, a doctor on the front line fighting the novel coronavirus in a hospital in Tunisia, is spending the Muslim holy month of Ramadan away from her family. "It's been five weeks since I've held my children in my arms," Jamoussi said, before putting on a protective suit, mask and eye gear to start her shift. Jamoussi works in the intensive care unit of the Abderrahmane Memmi hospital in Ariana, north of the capital Tunis. Like many working in wards treating COVID-19 patients, she is living away from her loved ones in order to avoid the risk of spreading the infection.

That's particularly difficult during the month of Ramadan - usually a time when families come together for meals at dusk when the day-time fast is broken. "What helps us hold on is the satisfaction of seeing patients pull through," said Jamoussi, who has a seven-year-old son and 11-year-old daughter. Tunisia has officially declared 40 coronavirus deaths from 975 cases since early March, and so far has avoided seeing its hospitals overwhelmed by the disease.

Many front-line hospital workers are staying in isolation during their rotations and for five to 14 days after they finish. Those who live alone, or have a separate bathroom, can self-isolate in their own homes but others are put up in hotel rooms or hostels provided by regional authorities or hotels free of charge. Public-sector doctors in Tunisia are paid between 2,000 and 3,600 dinars (\$690-\$1,245), and other medical workers earn a few hundred dinars. "I was very afraid of infecting my family. I had nightmares about it", said Jamoussi, who found through her own connections, a small flat.



Amira Jamoussi

negative for the virus - and avoid close contact.

"The medical personnel are constantly asking for tests so they can leave isolation as quickly as possible," Chaouch said. But they are also anxious to leave because their accommodation is often austere. Doctors and nurses have shared photos on social media of dirty rooms and sandwiches for meals, while others have been left waiting for lodgings for hours at the end of their shifts. Jamoussi, who is in her forties, paid tribute to private donors who have helped equip her team at the hospital and improve the daily lives of medical workers.

But "the hardest thing is to see some colleagues isolating in terrible conditions", she said. Around a hundred medical personnel are in isolation in the capital Tunis, where the main facilities treating coronavirus patients are located, according to health ministry official Mohamed Rabhi. He was unable to provide figures for the rest of the country. The government has not requisitioned hotels for those requiring isolation, instead counting on facilities to volunteer their services. Some have been reluctant to do so given the costs involved. — AFP

'Don't have a choice'

Life in isolation has become "particularly difficult with Ramadan", said Nawel Chaouch, head of the pulmonology department at the Abderrahmane Memmi hospital. "There are many women among the staff, and delegating the preparation of Ramadan meals to their husbands is not easy," she added. Some staff members have been able to spend a few days with their families after quarantining and if they test

Relief mixes with worry as Nigeria eases lockdowns

LAGOS: Tailor Morenike Alabi was convinced yesterday that a decision to ease a lockdown on Nigeria's largest city Lagos was the right call-but other residents feared the move could see coronavirus cases rocket. "One thing is sure: the suffering, hunger, idleness and uncertainties of the past one month will ease," the 33-year-old told AFP as she waited to sell a pile of hand-made facemasks. "At least, people can go out to look for money to feed."

President Muhammadu Buhari on Monday ordered a "phased and gradual easing" from next week of a lockdown covering Africa's biggest city, neighbouring Ogun state and the national capital Abuja. For a month now, millions of people have been ordered to stay home under the measures aimed at curbing the spread of a virus that has caused 1,337 confirmed infections and 40 deaths in the country.

The restrictions have seen usually bustling streets emptied and taken a huge toll on the vast numbers of poor who depend on daily earnings to survive. Bus driver Taju Olonade said the latest move showed the president had finally listened "to the cries of the people". "For almost one month I have not earned a penny. My family has been surviving on the little money my wife made," Olonade told AFP. "I hope life will soon return to normal." — AFP

International

What do Israeli annexation plans mean for West Bank?

Arab foreign ministers hold talks on Israel's US-backed plans

JERUSALEM: Arab foreign ministers held talks yesterday on Israel's US-backed plans to annex key parts of the occupied West Bank. Concern has mounted since Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—an outspoken advocate of annexing large parts of the Palestinian territory—agreed to form a coalition with his centrist rival Benny Gantz. The Netanyahu-Gantz agreement includes a framework for implementing annexations outlined in US President Donald Trump's controversial plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, unveiled at the White House in January. Here are some key questions surrounding Israel's potential annexation moves, likely to inflame tensions in the volatile region.

What did Trump propose?

Trump, a staunch supporter of Israel, tapped his son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner to forge a Middle East peace plan. Kushner consulted widely with the Israelis on the initiative, but there was no input from the Palestinians after they cut all ties with the Trump administration accusing it of bias.

The Oslo peace accords of the 1990s gave the Palestinians self-rule in parts of the West Bank. But some 60 percent of the territory—dubbed Area C—remains under full Israeli civil and military control. That includes all Israeli settlements and Trump's plan gives US support for their an-

nexation. It also offers US recognition for Israeli annexation of the Jordan Valley, a strategic strip along the Jordanian border that makes up around a third of the West Bank.

Trump's plan provides for the creation of a Palestinian state in the remainder of the West Bank, including the city of Ramallah where president Mahmud Abbas is based, and in the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by Abbas rivals Hamas. Israel seized control of the West Bank, including east Jerusalem, in the Six-Day War of 1967 and has occupied it ever since. More than 600,000 Israelis live in settlements constructed in the territory, which Palestinians regard as the mainstay of their future state. The settlements are considered illegal under international law because they were built under military occupation.

How the US position evolved?

Kushner has said Washington wants an Israeli government in place that could work with the US on implementation of Trump's plan. The Jewish state had been without a stable government since December 2018. The Netanyahu-Gantz deal, sealed on April 20 after three inconclusive elections, looks set to end the stalemate. The United States said Monday it was ready to recognize Israel's annexation of much of the West Bank but asked the new unity government also to negotiate with the Palestinians.



TAMMUN: Palestinian protesters pray behind national flags during a protest against a US brokered Middle East peace plan, outside the West Bank village of Tamun near the Jordan Valley. Arab foreign ministers held talks yesterday on Israel's US-backed plans to annex key parts of the occupied West Bank. — AFP

"We are prepared to recognize Israeli actions," a State Department spokesperson said. The step would be "in the context of the Government of Israel agreeing to negotiate with the Palestinians along the lines set forth in President Trump's Vision", she said.

What Gantz, Netanyahu agreed

Netanyahu has lauded the Trump plan as a

"historic" opportunity for Israel. Gantz, a former armed forces chief, has also praised the initiative but raised concern about Israel acting unilaterally. Apart from the US, no country has publicly backed the annexation plans. Under the three-year coalition agreement, which is due to be approved by parliament in the coming days, Netanyahu will serve as premier for 18 months, with Gantz as his alternate. — AFP

On coronavirus ICU front line: A Thai nurse's story

BANGKOK: At the end of every 12-hour shift working with critically ill coronavirus patients, Thai nurse Suparvadee Tantrarattanapong has to disinfect herself before going home, where she sleeps in a separate room from her husband to avoid infecting him. The 36-year-old nurse in the intensive care ward at Bangkok's King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital says it's a grueling time, but saving lives is the most important thing — along with protecting her own loved ones. "I'm scared of getting infected and the virus leaking from the hospital," said Suparvadee, who has worked in the intensive care unit (ICU) for 14 years. But, despite her worry, she encourages patients to have hope.

"I keep telling patients that they are not fighting alone," she said. Suparvadee's job involves knowing every detail of each patient's condition. The novel coronavirus outbreak had also forced staff to learn a new workflow because none of them has experience with this kind of virus, she said. Since March 9, her hospital has treated nearly 200 coronavirus patients. Staff pride themselves on having not lost a single one. The hospital also pays close attention to preventing infections among staff. While fully suited in protective gear, Suparvadee guides her junior nurses on safety measures through their 12-hour shifts.

On Wednesday, Thailand reported nine new coronavirus infections but no deaths, taking its tally to 2,947 cases and 54 deaths since the outbreak began in January. Suparvadee's husband, Udomsak Tantrarattanapong, 37, said he understood and supported her work. "I told her to keep on fighting because whenever something new happens she gets through it just fine — and I'm sure she will this time as well," said Udomsak. — Reuters

Yemen reports first two deaths from coronavirus

ADEN: Yemen reported multiple coronavirus infections and deaths linked to the disease for the first time on Wednesday and an official in the southern port of Aden said the number of cases was very likely to increase in the coming days. The United Nations has said it fears the novel coronavirus could be spreading undetected in a country where millions face famine and lack medical care after Yemen announced its first COVID-19 case in the southern Hadhramout province on April 10.

Yemen has been mired in conflict since the Houthi group ousted the internationally recognized government from power in the capital Sanaa, prompting a Saudi-led alliance to intervene in March 2015. The war has shattered health and sanitation systems and authorities lack testing capabilities. The Saudi-backed government's health minister told Yemen TV late on Wednesday that five COVID-19 cases with two deaths were reported in Aden and noted that the prevalence of other diseases with similar symptoms, such as dengue fever, made it difficult to detect coronavirus infections without testing.

"We have all been waiting for this moment and preparing for it despite our scarce (health) capabilities," said an official in the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), which on Sunday declared self-rule in Aden and other southern regions. "Yes this is yet another suffering for us but we must

be firm, calm and patient ... It is very likely the numbers will increase in coming days," Abdul Nasser al-Wali said. The STC, which is locked in a power struggle with the Saudi-backed government in its interim seat in the south, on Wednesday declared a three-day, 24-hour curfew and closure of mosques.

Authorities have told Reuters they have been unable to track down "patient zero" for Yemen's infections, an important step in tracing people potentially exposed to infection and containing an outbreak. On Tuesday the United Nations said there was a "very real probability" the virus was circulating within communities. Health workers say the virus could spread rapidly in a country where 24 million people — 80% of the population — rely on aid, and 10 million are at risk of famine. Disease is rife.

Divided country

Two sources familiar with the matter have told Reuters there has been at least one confirmed case in Houthi-controlled Sanaa, but the movement's health ministry denied this and said all suspected cases had tested negative for COVID-19. On Wednesday the Aden-based government's emergency coronavirus committee voiced concerns that Houthi officials were not admitting to a coronavirus outbreak in the capital.

The Saudi-led coalition has declared a temporary nationwide ceasefire due to the pandemic as the United Nations seeks to hold a virtual meeting of the warring parties to cement a permanent truce, coordinate coronavirus efforts and restart peace talks. The Iran-aligned Houthis, who control most big urban centers, have not accepted the truce and violence has continued. Tensions also resurfaced in the south after the STC declared emergency rule, threatening to renew conflict between the separatists and the Saudi-backed government, both part of the anti-Houthi coalition. — Reuters

International

Libya unity govt protests 'French Rafale overflight'

Haftar announces Ramadan truce

TRIPOLI: Libya's UN-recognized government has protested over what it said was an unauthorized overflight of territory under its control by a French-built Rafale warplane. The Rafale and a refueling aircraft had flown over Misrata, 200 kilometers east of Tripoli, and Abu Grein, a combat zone further east, the Government of National Accord's foreign ministry said in a statement. "The French foreign ministry indicated to us that it would contact the French defense ministry and give us details," the GNA said.

The GNA, which added it had voiced its "displeasure" over the incident, did not specify if the Rafale was operated by the French armed forces or another country's military. The North African nation has been gripped by chaos since the 2011 ouster and killing of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi, with rival administrations in the east and west vying for power. France has repeatedly denied supporting eastern military strongman General Khalifa Haftar in his battle to dislodge the Tripoli-based GNA since April last year.

Ramadan truce

Meanwhile, Libya strongman Khalifa Haftar said his forces would cease hostilities for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan following international calls for a truce in the war-torn country. "The commander general announces the halting of military operations from his side," a spokesman for Haftar, who controls swathes of

eastern and southern Libya, said from the eastern city of Benghazi. Haftar's rival, the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) had yet to respond, and an AFP correspondent reported hearing explosions in the centre of the capital Tripoli after the announcement. The call for a truce during Ramadan, which began in Libya on April 24, came in response to "appeals from friendly nations," the Haftar spokesman said.

He warned violations by the GNA would be met with an "immediate and harsh response." Last week, the UN, EU and several countries called for both sides to lay down their arms during the holy month. The announcement comes after pro-Haftar forces suffered a series of setbacks in recent weeks, with GNA forces ousting them from two key coastal cities west of Tripoli. Backed by Turkey, GNA troops are now encircling Haftar's main rear base at Tarhunah, 60 kilometers southeast of the capital.

Since launching an offensive to seize Tripoli last April, several cease-fires between Haftar's forces and the GNA have fallen through, with both sides accusing the other of violations. Haftar's opponents accuse him of wanting to establish a new military dictatorship in the country. On Monday he claimed he had "a popular mandate" to govern, declaring a key 2015 political deal over and vowing to press his assault to seize Tripoli. The oil-rich North African nation has been



This image grab taken from a video on April 28, 2020 shows military strongman Khalifa Haftar giving a speech, saying he had "a popular mandate" to govern the country. — AFP

gripped by chaos since the ouster and killing of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

In another development, Turkey has accused Libya's strongman Khalifa Haftar of seeking to "create a military dictatorship" and vowed to

"defend" the government in Tripoli. The oil-rich North African nation has been mired in chaos since the ouster and killing of long-time dictator Gaddafi in 2011, with rival administrations in the east and west vying for power. — Agencies

Pompeo slams Qatar and South Africa for taking Cuba doctors

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday criticized South Africa and Qatar for accepting doctors from Cuba to battle the coronavirus, accusing the communist island of profiting from the pandemic. Cuba's globe-trotting doctors have long been a source of diplomatic soft power and pride for Havana, but Washington says the medical workers only benefit the government and has encouraged them to defect.

"We've noticed how the regime in Havana has taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to continue its exploitation of Cuban medical workers," Pompeo told reporters. "We applaud leaders in Brazil and in Ecuador and Bolivia and other countries which have refused to turn a blind eye to these abuses by the Cuban regime and ask all countries to do the same, including places like South Africa and Qatar," he said.

"Governments accepting Cuban doctors must pay them directly. Otherwise, when they pay the regime, they are helping the Cuban government turn a profit on human trafficking." South Africa, which like Qatar has friendly relations with the United States, on Monday announced that 217 Cuban

doctors had arrived in the country, which has the highest number of coronavirus infections in Africa. Cuba has sent doctors to more than 20 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic including hard-hit Italy as well as Mexico. France has also authorized Cuban teams to help in its overseas territories.

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel reacted to Pompeo on Twitter, writing: "The United States is being deliberately deceitful by attacking Cuba's international medical cooperation with lies and slander." "Cuba's solidarity further isolates the aggressive policies of the United States," he said as he shared articles from Cuban state media. Cuba has made health care a societal pillar despite the poverty of the island, which has been subject to US sanctions for six decades.

Former president Barack Obama sought to reconcile with Cuba, calling the isolation policy a failure, and ended a program in which Washington encouraged Cuban doctors to defect and resettle in the United States—whose capitalist medical system offers exponentially higher incomes. President Donald Trump's administration has snapped back US pressure sharply and has imposed visa restrictions on Cuban officials involved in medical missions.

Cuba says it earned \$6.3 billion from its medical dispatches in 2018 and used the proceeds to finance its own universal health care coverage. One of the staunchest critics of the program is Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right ally of Trump, who kicked out 8,000 Cuban health workers as he took office. Cuba's health system briefly became an issue in the US presidential election as opponents of leftist Bernie Sanders assailed his past praise for Havana's record on medical care and literacy. — AFP

Public firms urged to replace foreigners with Omanis

MUSCAT: Oman has ordered state-owned companies to accelerate the process of replacing foreign staff with Omani nationals, especially in senior positions, to create more jobs for its citizens. The finance ministry gave public sector companies until July 2021 to draw up timetables to appoint Omanis in the place of foreign staff, including in managerial positions.

The ministry said large numbers of expatriates still occupied managerial posts in state-run firms. Foreigners make up more than 40 percent of Oman's population of 4.6 million, and have played a major role in the Gulf state's development for several decades. Around 25 million foreign nationals, mostly Asians, live and work in the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. But the oil-rich region has been hit hard by falling crude prices since 2014, and suffered a new blow with the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on world markets.

Faced with an economic slump and a sharp drop in oil revenues, Oman and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have been trying hard to create jobs for their own citizens. The GCC states of Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain are seeking to diversify their economies and integrate millions of new graduates into the workforce. All have introduced legislation to give nationals preference over foreigners in both the public and private sectors. — AFP

International

Biden faces calls to address 'sexual-assault allegation'

Trump brushes off polls showing Biden is leading

WASHINGTON: Presumptive US Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden is facing growing calls from within and outside his party to respond to a former aide's allegation that he sexually assaulted her nearly 30 years ago, an assertion Biden's campaign has denied. Tara Reade, who worked as a staff assistant in Biden's US Senate office from December 1992 to August 1993, has accused Biden of pinning her against a wall in 1993 and reaching under her shirt and her skirt.

Biden's campaign has said the incident never occurred. Biden himself has not addressed the allegation, and the former vice president has not been questioned on the matter in recent interviews with national and local media. Two more women corroborated part of Reade's allegation in interviews with Business Insider. A Biden campaign spokesman declined to comment on Wednesday about the new sources or calls for Biden to respond.

Reuters has not been able to independently confirm Reade's allegation and was also unable to reach Reade or a representative for comment. The New York Times said in a statement on Wednesday an investigation it conducted of the matter "made no conclusion either way." US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,

an influential liberal Democrat, said during an online forum this week that Reade's accusation deserves a fair examination.

Nina Turner, who was national campaign co-chair for Biden's former White House rival, Bernie Sanders, told Reuters on Wednesday that Biden has to answer the question. "It can't appear that she's being ignored just because it's an inconvenient truth for certain people in the Democratic Party," Turner said. The Washington Post editorial board on Wednesday called on Biden, 77, to speak about the allegations and release papers from the relevant period, when he was a senator from Delaware, in case those documents might include a complaint Reade has said she filed over the incident. Several prominent women on Biden's vice-presidential short list, such as Senators Kamala Harris and Amy Klobuchar and former Georgia state Representative Stacey Abrams, have stood by Biden. So has Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, another former presidential candidate, who has made aiding victims of sexual assault a centerpiece of her political career.

President Donald Trump's reelection campaign increasingly has tried to turn the allegations into a liability for Biden. In a memo to the media on Wednesday, Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh said Biden was

seeking to shield himself from criticism by avoiding personally addressing Reade's allegation. Trump, 73, a Republican who will face Biden in the Nov. 3 general election, has been accused by more than a dozen women of sexual assault and misconduct over the years, allegations which he and his aides have consistently denied. Reade, 56, was one of eight women who last year came forward to say Biden had hugged, kissed or touched them in ways that made them uncomfortable, though none accused him of sexual assault. She publicly accused him of the assault on a podcast in March. At the time of the women's statements last year about behavior that made them uncomfortable, Biden, who had yet to launch his presidential bid, released a video promising to be "much more mindful" of people's personal space.

Trump brushes off polls

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump told Reuters on Wednesday he does not believe opinion polls that show his likely Democratic presidential opponent, Joe Biden, leading in the 2020 race for the White House. During an interview in the Oval Office, the Republican president said he did not expect the election to be a referendum on his handling of the coron-

avirus pandemic and added he was surprised the former vice president was doing well.

"I don't believe the polls," Trump said. "I believe the people of this country are smart. And I don't think that they will put a man in who's incompetent." Trump has criticized Biden's decades-long record as a US senator and as President Barack Obama's vice president. "And I don't mean incompetent because of a condition that he's got now. I mean he's incompetent for 30 years. Everything he ever did was bad. His foreign policy was a disaster," Trump said.

Polls conducted this week by Reuters/Ipsos about a general election matchup showed that 44% of registered voters said they would back Biden in the Nov. 3 election, while 40% said they would support Trump. More critical for Trump, a recent poll by Reuters/Ipsos of the three key battleground states of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania had Biden with a 45%-39% edge over the president. Trump's victories in those states in the 2016 election helped propel him to the White House. Trump closely questioned his campaign manager, Brad Parscale, and other political advisers after they showed him poll numbers showing him losing the re-election race to Biden, according to a source familiar with the matter. — Agencies

Rare inflammatory syndrome seen in children with COVID

WASHINGTON: Children have largely been spared the worst of COVID-19, but there may be a rare complication - an inflammatory syndrome that one doctor described as causing patients to feel like "every blood vessel in the body is on fire." Britain's National Health Service first sounded the alarm over the weekend, warning about a small rise in children infected with the coronavirus that have "overlapping features of toxic shock syndrome and atypical Kawasaki disease." "All of the pediatricians and critical care medics are working together to see whether it's connected to COVID-19," France's health minister Olivier Veran said Wednesday.

Data shows that children are overall not at high risk from the virus and accounted for just 0.4 percent of hospitalized cases in the US, according to official data released earlier this month. But reports of autoimmune complications arising across Europe and the United States highlight the need for parents to be vigilant, doctors say, even as much more research is needed to definitively tie the virus to these symptoms. Sunil Sood, a physician at Cohen Children's Medical Center in New York, told AFP he and colleagues had seen five or six such cases over the past three weeks, "and we've all been wondering why these somewhat older children, older than usually seen with Kawasaki disease, are coming in" with inflamed blood vessels. — AFP

'Leak concerns' fuels revelation of Gilead drug results

CHICAGO: Concerns over leaks compelled the top US infectious disease official to reveal data on Gilead Sciences Inc's experimental drug remdesivir, the first in a scientifically rigorous clinical trial to show benefit in treating COVID-19. The dramatic announcement by Dr Anthony Fauci in the Oval Office on Wednesday prompted concerns among scientists that the Trump administration was raising hopes about a coronavirus treatment before sharing the full data with researchers.

As a cautionary example of inflating the potential value of a therapy, some pointed to President Donald Trump's repeated endorsements of malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as a treatment, with no evidence that it works. Newer data suggests the malaria treatments may carry significant risks for some sufferers of the respiratory disease caused by the virus.

Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), which is running the trial, said he took the first opportunity to get the word out that patients taking a dummy treatment or placebo should be switched to remdesivir in hopes of benefiting from it. He expressed concern that leaks of partial information would lead to confusion. Since the White House was not planning a daily virus briefing, Fauci said he was invited to release the news at a news conference with Louisiana Gov John Bel Edwards (D). "It was purely driven by ethical concerns," Fauci told Reuters in a telephone interview.

"I would love to wait to present it at a scientific meeting, but it's just not in the cards when you have a situation where the ethical concern about getting the drug to people on placebo dominates the conversation." An independent data safety and monitoring



WASHINGTON: Dr Anthony Fauci (left), director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, listens as Response Coordinator for White House Coronavirus Task Force Deborah Birx speaks during a meeting with US President Donald Trump and Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards in the Oval Office of the White House on Wednesday. — AFP

board, which had looked at the preliminary results of the NIAID trial, determined it had met its primary goal of reducing hospital stays. On Tuesday evening, that information was conveyed in a conference call to scientists studying the drug globally.

"There are literally dozens and dozens of investigators around the world," Fauci said. "People were starting to leak it." But he did not give details of where the unreported data was being shared. Several scientists interviewed by Reuters felt the White House setting seemed inappropriate for the release of highly anticipated government-funded trial data on the Gilead therapy. They had expected it to be presented simultaneously in a detailed news release, a briefing at a medical meeting or in a scientific journal, allowing researchers to review the data. — Reuters

International

Google 'task force' fights bad coronavirus adverts

COVID-19 to cause record emissions fall: IEA

SAN FRANCISCO: Google said yesterday its task force devoted to fighting "bad" ads hawking bogus coronavirus cures, illegitimate unemployment benefits and overpriced medical supplies had blocked tens of millions of messages. Google has blocked and removed coronavirus-related marketing pitches in recent months for policy violations including price-gouging and misleading claims, according to ads privacy and safety vice president Scott Spencer.

"We have a dedicated COVID-19 task force working around the clock building new detection technology and improving our existing enforcement systems to stop bad actors," Spencer said in a blog post. "These concerted efforts are working." With health worries pervasive around the world, guarding against efforts to take advantage of people through pandemic-themed online ads is a priority, according to Spencer. Google said it has been watching closely for advertising abuses taking advantage of the crisis since the COVID-19 outbreak started.

Deceptive ads have often been the work of "sophisticated actors attempting to evade our enforcement systems with advanced tactics," Spencer said. He gave the example of a sharp spike in ads offering

coveted supplies such as face masks at inflated prices designed to entice online orders that are never filled. Alphabet-owned Google has a clear interest in protecting the integrity of the online advertising platform that is its money-making engine.

Google last year blocked and removed 2.7 billion "bad ads" and suspended nearly a million advertising accounts for policy violations, according to Spencer. The California-based internet firm assembled a team last year to track signs of phishing or trickery regarding clicking on links, cutting the numbers of such "bad ads" by 50 percent as a result, Spencer said. Google blocked more than 35 million phishing ads and 19 million "trick-to-click" ads last year, according to the company.

Meanwhile, the International Energy Agency said yesterday that COVID-19 is expected to cause global energy emissions to fall a record eight percent

this year due to an unprecedented drop in demand for coal, oil and gas. The IEA's Global Energy Review was based on an analysis of electricity demand over more than 100 days, during which much of the world has entered lockdown in a bid to control the pandemic. It predicted that global energy demand would fall six percent in 2020 - seven times more than during the 2008 financial crisis and the biggest year-on-year drop since World War II.

This would be the equivalent of losing the entire energy demand of India, the world's third-largest power consumer, the IEA said. Advanced economies are set to see the biggest declines, with demand in the United States down nine percent and an 11-percent fall in the European Union likely. "This is a historic shock to the entire energy world," said IEA executive director Fatih Birol. "The plunge in demand for nearly all major fuels is staggering, espe-

cially for coal, oil and gas."

With consumption falling, the IEA said it had noticed a "major shift" to low-carbon sources of power, such as wind and solar, which are set to make up 40 percent of global electricity generation-six percentage points more than coal. Coal and natural gas "are finding themselves increasingly squeezed between low overall power demand and increasing output from renewables," the report said. Natural gas demand is set to fall five percent in 2020 after a decade of uninterrupted growth. Following a 2018 peak, coal-fired power generation is set to fall more than 10 percent this year.

Overall, energy-related carbon emissions are set to fall by almost eight percent, reaching their lowest level since 2010. If this plays out this would be by far the largest annual decrease on record, more than six times larger than the 2009 fall precipitated by the global financial crisis. The United Nations says CO2 emissions must fall by 7.6 percent annually through to 2030 in order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the most ambitious temperature cap of the Paris climate accord. Until COVID-19 struck, emissions had been rising year on year. —Agencies



Tens of millions of messages blocked

Dream vacation US road trips canceled; virus shutter states

LOS ANGELES: Parisians Carole de la Cheneliere and Olivier Merleau were all set for their once-in-a-lifetime road trip down America's famous interstates-but then, the pandemic struck. This Friday, they were due to arrive in Los Angeles, from where the open road would have carried them up the Pacific coast to San Francisco, back to San Diego, then on a desert loop through the iconic landscapes of the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon and Zion national parks. "Visiting the United States has been on my bucket list for years and this trip was supposed to be a dream vacation to celebrate our 55th birthdays," said de la Cheneliere, who works at a high-end clothing store in the French capital.

"We had organized everything," including exchanging currency, buying maps and gathering tips from other road trippers, she said. The plan was to end in Las Vegas to celebrate their birthdays, which fall within five days of each other. But the couple had to cancel as museums, casinos, beaches, parks and attractions like Disneyland across the US one by one began to shutter their doors in an effort to stem the spread of the potentially deadly coronavirus.

Hotels and airlines are almost inoperative as the normal tourism high season begins, with no clear reopening dates in sight. While some states are looking to ease their lockdowns by reopening certain businesses, many tour operators believe they



This handout selfie released by Carole de la Cheneliere shows her and Olivier Merleau on Lacanau beach, France in August 2019.—AFP

will be the last to recover. "We're expendable—we're tourism," said Sabra Purdy, 41, who runs a climbing center in California's Joshua Tree National Park. "Nobody needs us, and we could have an incredibly meager year." "There's really nothing that we can do about that."

Sites like the Grand Canyon drew almost six million visitors a year before they were closed due to the pandemic. But even if state governors lift restrictions, tourism needs another key factor to return: confidence. "Until there's some kind of feeling of safety among the public, where they feel safe going to a buffet or a show or a tour, it doesn't matter if we're open or not," said Matthew Meier, 38, whose tour company runs trips in Las Vegas and the nearby Grand Canyon. "I wouldn't go right now... if the casinos open tomorrow, I'm not taking my family down there. And I'm sure a lot of people feel the same way," he added.—AFP

Remdesivir shows 'clear-cut' effect in treating COVID-19

WASHINGTON: COVID-19 patients who took the antiviral remdesivir recovered about 30 percent faster than those on a placebo, the results of a major clinical trial showed Wednesday, as the top US epidemiologist hailed the drug's "clear-cut" benefit. The finding represents the first time any medication has been shown to improve outcomes against the COVID-19 illness, which has claimed more than 220,000 lives globally and ground the world economy to a halt.

The US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), which oversaw the trial, said that patients on the drug made by Gilead Sciences had a 31 percent faster time to recovery than those on a placebo. "Specifically, the median time to recovery was 11 days for patients treated with remdesivir compared with 15 days for those who received placebo," it said. For Anthony Fauci, who leads the NIAID and has been one of the government's point people during the crisis, "the data shows that remdesivir has a clear-cut, significant, positive effect in diminishing the time to recovery."

"Although a 31 percent improvement doesn't seem like a knockout 100 percent, it is a very important proof of concept because what it has proven is that a drug can block this virus," he told reporters at the White House. The results also suggested that people who were on the drug were less likely to die, although the difference was small. The

mortality rate was 8.0 percent for the group receiving remdesivir versus 11.6 percent for the placebo group.

The trial began on February 21 and involved 1,063 people across 68 locations in the United States, Europe and Asia. Neither the patients nor their physicians were aware of which group they belonged to, in order to eliminate unconscious bias. Peter Horby, an epidemiologist at the University of Oxford who was not involved in the study, said: "We need to see the full results, but if confirmed this would be a fantastic result and great news for the fight against COVID-19."

President Donald Trump, who described the news as a "positive event," said he supported an emergency use authorization for the drug, which would allow doctors to prescribe it more widely. The CEO of Gilead Sciences, the US laboratory that manufactures remdesivir, Daniel O'Day, said the company plans to donate the 1.5 million doses they have in stock-enough to treat at least 140,000 patients. The company would then sell the drug at an "affordable" price, he told the health news site Stat.

Remdesivir, which previously failed in trials against Ebola, belongs to a class of drugs that act on the virus directly—as opposed to controlling the abnormal and often lethal autoimmune response it causes. It mimics one of the four building blocks of RNA and DNA and gets absorbed into the virus's genome, short-circuiting its replication process. In his remarks to the press, Fauci indicated that the approach could pave the way for better drugs adopting the same model. While the findings were broadly welcomed by scientists, some cautioned that the benefits were relatively modest. —AFP

International

Funeral home overwhelmed as COVID death toll mounts

New York's homeless flock to empty subway trains

NEW YORK: At a New York funeral home, the undertakers can't bear to disappoint grieving families so they try to accept all coronavirus victims even if it means they are overwhelmed. The number of daily COVID-19 deaths has halved from the peak 799 that New York recorded on April 9, but the phone at International Funeral & Cremation Services, a female-run business in Harlem, is still ringing off the hook. "They're desperate, they're like, 'Hey, they're going to send my loved one to Potter's Field, the hospitals can't hold their body anymore. Can you help? Can you help?'" said funeral director Nicole Warring, one of four women who run the parlor.

"And it is so hard to say, give me a call back in two days, so that just breaks my heart," she told AFP. They have been inundated with COVID-19 victims since New York became the epicenter of America's outbreak last month. For many families in the state, where more than 20,000 people are thought to have died from the virus, finding a funeral home able to accept their relative is a challenge.

"We had people from all over the boroughs calling because a lot of funeral homes are filled to capacity. They're not even taking any more calls," said Warring. Manager Alisha Narvaez also hates adding to the pain of the recently bereaved so endeavors to accept every body, meaning the staff are working day and night. "It's frustrating for me to not be able to service

them the way I'd like. So the hardest part is turning families down, which I try not to do," said Narvaez.

One day last week AFP watched the undertakers bring two bodies to the funeral home in the back of a nondescript minivan. Often they have driven to one of several white refrigerated trucks strewn across the city in recent weeks to collect the dead. "Some of the trailers, the bodies (are) on the floors," said Warring. "I don't want to step on anyone—it's just an overflow of bodies and it's traumatizing."

Narvaez, wearing heels, and staff member Lily Sage Weinrieb transported the bodies, which were in bags marked "COVID-19," into the premises on a stretcher. Inside, the team prepares the bodies, completes administrative procedures and performs ceremonies in a special room where only ten people are permitted because of social distancing restrictions. The bodies are then cremated at another site. When it's a COVID-19 case relatives rarely attend.

"People are in quarantine and don't come for services. So it'll just be us—the director with the loved one at the cemetery. And so we'll record it and send it to (friends and family). It's tough," said Narvaez. Narvaez, in her 30s, has been working seven days a week throughout the crisis but doesn't envisage being able to get some rest anytime soon. "We have a backlog. So for us it will be a bit chaotic still for another two months



NEW YORK: Alisha Narvaez Manager at International Funeral & Cremation Services transports a body to the funeral home in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. — AFP

maybe. "I just hope it does slow down a little bit because I really need a break. I need a vacation after this," she said.

Meanwhile, New York leaders pledged to take action against a surge of homeless people sleeping on empty subway trains during the city's coronavirus crisis. Photos and video showing the homeless seeking shelter in the Big Apple's underground transit system have circulated widely

on social media this week, sparking outrage. "The cars were filthy, they were disgusting, homeless people were there with all their belongings," said Governor Andrew Cuomo, lamenting a "deterioration" in the conditions of the network.

He ordered the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the independent body which runs the subway, to come up with a plan to scrub every train every day.—Agencies

German COVID-19 lockdown 'snitches' spark a hot debate

BERLIN: On a sunny Sunday in April, 20 people were enjoying a barbecue in the city of Schwerin in northern Germany. The police promptly intervened, slapping them with a fine for breaking new social distancing rules to limit the spread of COVID-19. They were alerted to the festivities by a neighbor, "outraged by such behavior", who also proceeded to boast about her efforts on social media, opening up a heated debate about the return of denunciation to Germany and whether it is acceptable in the current crisis.

Telling on your neighbors is a highly sensitive subject in a country still haunted by memories of Nazism and the former communist dictatorship in East Germany, two regimes under which informing on others was practically a national policy. The term "Düninziant" ("snitch") has been trending on Twitter, fuelling ever more reference to the Third Reich and the Stasi secret police. "All of this appears to confirm a deep-seated prejudice that Germans have against themselves: That

when in doubt, a part of the population is willing to become an extension of state power," psychology professor Christian Stoecker told Der Spiegel weekly.

But Germany is not the only country to have seen a rise in the number of people reporting fellow citizens to the authorities for breaching virus-related social distancing rules. Similar observations have been made in countries around the world where lockdowns have been imposed: In New Zealand, a dedicated website was deluged with reports; in South Africa, a wedding was interrupted after an anonymous call; and in France, the emergency number 17 has been overrun with calls. "The phenomenon is universal, but with different regional characteristics. It happens more often in urban areas, where many people depend on each other, than in less populated areas where you have more space," said Rafael Behr, a professor of criminology and sociology at the Hamburg Police Academy.—AFP

Dutch gambling on 'intelligent lockdown' to beat coronavirus

THE HAGUE: The shops are open and families cycle along in the sunny spring weather in the Netherlands, which has opted for what it calls an "intelligent lockdown" to curb the coronavirus pandemic. In contrast to most other European countries where people are virtually housebound, the Dutch authorities have merely advised people to stay home and to keep 1.5 meters of social distance. While restaurants, bars, museums and its infamous sex clubs remain shut, and the famed cannabis 'coffee shops' are open for take-away only, the outdoors-loving Dutch are otherwise allowed to leave home when they want.

Schools meanwhile start to reopen from May 11. "My friend in Belgium has to stay at home and is only allowed to go out to walk her dog in the street. I mean, come on, be serious," says Bianca Kragten, who runs a bike shop in The Hague. Cheerfully ignoring the absence of the tourists who would normally be a major part of her business, Kragten hires out bikes in front of the shop, which she has decorated with little flags to "cheer

up" people. "It was total panic for our business in the first few weeks. Then we realized that we were among the lucky ones who were allowed to remain open," she said.

Her neighbor, bookstore owner Marijn de Koeijer, agreed. "I think it would be very difficult to stay at home all day. I'm very happy with the opportunities we have, even if they are limited," he said among his bookshelves a few minutes walk from the central railway station in The Hague, the seat of the Dutch government. The government itself has won the "support of the population" with its measures as they are "easier to defend and explain to the people", said de Koeijer.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte - who came up with the phrase "intelligent lockdown" - has been clear on the policy.

"We don't work like that in the Netherlands, where the government says 'you have to do this, you have to do that,'" Rutte told a press conference at the end of March. —AFP

International

Iran tells US not to 'plot' against it amid tensions

Washington and Tehran trade barbs

TEHRAN: Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has told the United States it "should not plot against the Iranian nation every day", amid fresh tensions between the arch foes in the Gulf. Tehran and Washington have traded barbs over a spate of incidents in the past year involving their forces in the sensitive waters of the Gulf. Their latest high-seas confrontation came on April 15, when the United States said 11 Iranian boats harassed its navy ships in what it described as the international waters of the "Arabian Gulf".

President Donald Trump then tweeted that he had ordered the US Navy to "shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea". Iran's president on Wednesday replied that "the Americans should know that this gulf is called the Arabian Gulf, not the New York Gulf or the Washington Gulf". "They must understand the situation by that name and by the coastal nation that has protected this waterway for thousands of years," Rouhani said in a televised address during a cabinet meeting.

"They should not plot against the Iranian nation every day. "The soldiers of our armed forces in the guardians of the Revolution, the army, Basij (paramilitary organization) and the police have always been and will be the guardians of the Arabian Gulf." Iran and the United States have been at loggerheads for decades. Tensions between them have escalated since 2018 when Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from a multinational accord that froze Iran's nuclear program and reimposed crippling sanctions on its economy.

The arch enemies have appeared to come close to a direct military confrontation twice since June last year, when Iran shot down a US drone in the Gulf. On that occasion, Trump cancelled retaliatory air strikes at the last minute. Trump also opted not to take any military action in January after Iran fired a barrage of missiles at US troops stationed in Iraq. Iran launched the missiles after a US drone strike near Baghdad airport killed Qasem Soleimani, the general who headed the Revolutionary Guards' foreign operations arm, the Quds Force. — AFP



TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani chairs a cabinet session beneath portraits of the late founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (left) and its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday. — AFP

In Russia lockdown, fears of a return to the bottle

MOSCOW: Stuck in cramped flats and struggling with fears of the coronavirus and its economic impact, many Russians are worried about the return of an old demon. "When I found myself alone at home, the first thought I had was 'ah, it's a good time to get drunk,'" says Tatyana, a recovering alcoholic on lockdown in Moscow.

"Not everyone manages to resist during confinement," says the 50-year-old, who has been sober nearly seven years and is attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings online. Despite Russia's reputation for hard drinking, alcoholism has been on the wane in the country for years, in part due to anti-drink campaigns and aggressive moves by authorities to control sales. Alcohol consumption in Russia fell by more than 40 percent between 2003 and 2016, according to the World Health Organization, and Russian adults began drinking less on average than the French or Germans. But experts and campaigners are pointing to worrying signs that under-stress Russians may be reviving old habits. Alcohol purchases jumped after authorities imposed lockdown orders in late March, with sales in the first week of isolation rising by 65 percent, according to market research group GfK.

In a survey by campaign group Sober Russia, 75 percent of respondents reported buying more alcohol than usual, similar to

what they would purchase ahead of New Year's Eve. Many were simply stockpiling, but sales were also boosted by popular myths that alcohol can prevent the virus. "Eighty percent of those we surveyed think that alcohol immunizes you against COVID-19, while on the contrary, it weakens immunity and exacerbates chronic conditions," says Sober Russia's chief Sultan Khamzayev.

Vasily Shurov, a psychiatrist specializing in addiction, says the phone hasn't stopped ringing at the private addiction clinic he heads in Moscow. All its places are now full or reserved. "In isolation, patients who are fragile experience a higher level of anxiety" and those at risk "start drinking as it's the only way they can relax," he says. In the clinic, haggard patients wander through the corridors and gather in the smoking room.

A disheveled man in his 30s says that he arrived three days earlier and "it's better this way, for everyone back home". Along with increased drinking, groups helping victims of domestic violence say the number of reported attacks has grown dramatically since the lockdown started. Higher levels of drinking may not be the only factor, but Anna Rivina, the head of Moscow's "No to Violence" victim-support centre, says that "alcohol rouses the devil" and women are reporting "more severe" violence. — AFP

Florida moves to ease coronavirus lockdown

MIAMI: The governor of Florida, among the last to lock down his state against the US coronavirus outbreak, announced on Wednesday he would permit a limited economic reopening next week while leaving restraints intact for the dense greater-Miami area. Florida became the latest, and one of the two largest, of about a dozen states forging ahead to ease crippling restrictions on business activity without vastly expanded virus testing and other safeguards that medical experts recommend should be in place first.

"There is a light at the end of the tunnel," Governor Ron DeSantis said as he unveiled his "phase-one" plan for relaxing mandatory workplace closures and stay-at-home orders imposed four weeks ago. Earlier in the week his counterpart in Texas, Greg Abbott, another governor closely aligned with fellow Republican President Donald Trump, announced a similar economic reopening strategy due to go into effect on Friday.

As questions lingered over when and how to loosen social-distancing rules employed as the chief weapon against a highly contagious virus with no vaccine, word emerged from Washington on Wednesday of a promising new treatment for the disease. The US government's top infectious-disease official, Dr. Anthony Fauci, said the experimental antiviral drug remdesivir, from

pharmaceutical maker Gilead Sciences Inc, had proven effective in a key clinical trial.

With preliminary results showing patients recovering 31% faster with the drug than with a placebo, remdesivir will become the standard of care for treating COVID-19, the potentially deadly lung disease caused by the novel coronavirus, Fauci told reporters at the White House. He called the development "highly significant." The US Food and Drug Administration said it was in talks with Gilead about making the drug available to patients as quickly as possible.

Mixed news

At the same time, a senior Trump administration official confirmed reports of an escalated campaign by federal agencies to speed development of a coronavirus vaccine, with the goal of securing 100 million doses by the end of this year. The encouraging news on the medical front contrasted with ominous new Commerce Department data showing the nation's gross domestic product contracted at an annualized rate of nearly 5% in the first quarter - its sharpest such drop since the 2007-2009 collapse - to end the longest expansion in US history. With millions of Americans out of jobs since the lockdowns went into effect and no overall federal plan beyond general guidelines issued by the White House on April 16, states and cities have come under mounting pressure to ease restrictions on as the outbreak appeared to be waning.

Public health experts have urged caution, saying that a curtailment of social distancing without large-scale virus testing or the means to trace close contacts of infected individuals could trigger a second wave of infections. — Reuters

International

Bollywood mourns another star as Rishi Kapoor dies at 67

A severe blow to Hindi movie industry and film lovers

MUMBAI: Bollywood mourned a second loss in as many days as celebrated actor Rishi Kapoor, whose career spanned half a century, died yesterday aged 67 after a prolonged struggle with cancer. His death came as a severe blow to the Hindi movie industry and film lovers, who were already reeling from the passing Wednesday of Irrfan Khan, one of the country's most feted actors, aged 53.

"Our dear Rishi Kapoor passed away peacefully... today after a two-year battle with leukemia," his family said in a statement. Fellow actor Amitabh Bachchan was among the first to mourn his death, tweeting: "I am destroyed". Born September 4, 1952, into the prolific Kapoor dynasty—which has produced four generations of actors including his son, Ranbir—he made his debut in the 1970's epic "Mera Naam Joker" ("My Name is Joker").

He received India's National Award for best child actor for his performance in the film, which his father Raj produced, directed and starred in. But it was his later persona as a romantic lead that won him legions of fans, who flocked to cinemas to see him sing, dance and charm his way into their hearts in films such as the 1973 superhit

"Bobby", and the 1977 comedy "Amar Akbar Anthony". As Kapoor grew older, the romantic roles ceased, allowing him the opportunity to display greater versatility.

He terrified audiences as a human trafficker in 2012's "Agnepath" ("Path of Fire") and won ap-



Kapoor died after a two-year battle with leukemia

plause for his portrayal of a cantankerous porn-watching grandfather in 2016's "Kapoor & Sons". After being diagnosed with cancer in 2018 he sought treatment in New York, but was looking to resume work shortly with plans to film a remake of the 2015 Hollywood film "The Intern". He was forced to return to hospital this month, where, his family said, "the doctors and medical staff... said he kept them entertained to the last". — AFP



TAMPA, Florida: In this file photo taken on April 27, 2014, Bollywood actor Rishi Kapoor receives the award for Best performance in a Negative Role during the fourth and final day of the 15th International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) Awards at the Raymond James Stadium. — AFP

Singaporeans who break quarantine for food pay hefty bill

SINGAPORE: A Singaporean man who broke his coronavirus quarantine with 30 minutes remaining to buy prata flatbread worth a few dollars was fined \$1,000, the latest in a string of tough punishments for those who breach the city-state's COVID-19 containment rules. The tiny island nation, known for its no-nonsense law enforcement and widespread surveillance, has one of the highest coronavirus caseloads in Asia due to mass outbreaks in cramped migrant worker dormitories. But it has won international praise for its strict quarantine and contact tracing regime that have limited infections in the wider community.

In mid-March, 22-year-old financial adviser Tay Chun Hsien was ordered not to leave his home after he was suspected of being a contact of a coronavirus patient, court documents show. But just 30 minutes before the order was due to expire he headed to a nearby food court where, according to local media, he ate roti prata, an Indian-inspired flatbread popular in Southeast Asia. As he was eating, an officer monitoring his quarantine called his mobile phone to check if he was at home but Tay said he had left to buy food because he was hungry, according to the case records. "At this critical stage in the nation's fight against COVID-19, everyone has a part to play. Persons who are subject to Home Quarantine Orders and other measures...must comply," said deputy public prosecutor Norman Yew, adding that Tay had returned home quickly and presented low risk of transmission. — Reuters

Mexican poor face virus with few defenses

MEXICO CITY: A day after learning he was infected with the coronavirus, an indigenous Mexican farmer named Samuel hanged himself from a tree. And he remained hanging there for hours because no one had protective gear to bring the body down - a grim illustration of the plight of Mexico's indigenous peoples, who are particularly vulnerable to the pandemic sweeping the globe because of their grinding poverty.

After the suicide, panic spread through the village of Ocosingo, one of the poorest native communities in Mexico. Samuel, 54, from the Zoque ethnic group, is believed to have been infected when two of his sons, working in a factory in northern Mexico, came home to impoverished Chiapas state after the plant shut down because of the health crisis.

An official with the Chiapas attorney general's office said the man suffered from depression, which worsened when he learned he was infected. The rest of Samuel's family is now infected, said Joel Morales, a community leader. And people in that village of 1,400 are terrified because there is only one clinic, with a lone

doctor and two nurses. There is also a lack of face masks, sanitizing gel for people to wash their hands and gloves, he said.

Ocosingo is one of the Mexican municipalities with the highest levels of extreme poverty, affecting 76 percent of the population in 2015, according to a non-governmental monitor called the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy. Surrounding Chiapas state, which is mainly indigenous, is also Mexico's poorest, with 76.4 percent of its people living in poverty in 2018. The fact that no one had gear to collect Samuel's body safely is a situation repeated in most of the indigenous areas of Mexico. A full fifth of the total population of 120 million identifies as indigenous, according to the National Statistics Institute.

No water for washing hands

As of Tuesday, 227 indigenous people tested positive for the coronavirus, out of a national tally of 16,700 cases and 1,600 deaths, the government says. It did not say how many indigenous people have died. Some ethnic groups have taken their own protective measures, such as shutting off access to their territories.

"For now it is the only way to stop contagion in these communities, where there is also a lack of hospitals and medicine," said Adelfo Regino, director of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples, or INPI in Spanish. But such measures cause conflict, such as a clash Monday between police and indigenous people protesting a

"sanitary cordon" and curfew declared in the Chiapas town of Yajalon, where they usually go to buy supplies. Four indigenous people were injured in the violence.

Besides hunger and unemployment, the 4,000 people of the Mixe community in the towns of San Pedro and San Pablo Ayutla in the southern state of Oaxaca have been struggling with drought for years. Now, with the pandemic, they are supposed to wash their hands frequently. "It is hard to exercise the human right to health when the human right to water is not guaranteed," said Yasnaya Aguilar, a Mixe linguist. To broadcast information about the pandemic to indigenous areas, 22 radio stations that are part of the INPI air the message "stay home" in 35 of Mexico's 68 ancestral languages.

Fear of hunger

In the San Quintin Valley, a fertile agricultural area in northern Baja California state, indigenous farm workers and their families have to deal not only with workplace exploitation but also unsanitary conditions. "Some landowners give them face coverings and sanitizing gel, but in other cases at least 10 people drink water from the same glass," said Amalia Tello, a community representative and radio personality in San Quintin. Like her, many of those workers from the Mixe, Triqui and Zapoteca ethnic groups emigrated north from Oaxaca seeking a better life. "They are afraid of getting infected, but here they have no choice but to work," said Tello. — AFP

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A man, wearing a protective mask, talks on his phone as he walks past a graffiti displaying a man wearing a protective face mask in downtown Beirut during the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

Survival or duty: The unsung 'second-line' virus workers

See Page 22

Porch costumes provide cheer in troubled times



Erin Kemble wears an "Elf on the Shelf" costume to promote social distancing and obeying stay at home orders, on the porch of their home in Clifton, Virginia.—AFP photos



Erin Kemble holds up part of a Elsa from Frozen costume.



Erin Kemble assembles an "Elf on the Shelf" costume.

A colorful cast of characters appear day after day on a porch in the US state of Virginia, urging people to stay upbeat and stay home during the coronavirus shutdowns. It started as a way for Erin Kemble to entertain her young cousins, who she misses seeing, and to keep herself busy after the catering company where she works closed. But the project, which she has maintained for a month, has morphed into a way to make people laugh during a dark time, with messages coming from as far as Arizona and Tokyo.

It started with a pig costume, and a sign saying "This little piggy stayed home," an echo of the popular nursery rhyme. When that image got 30,000 social media "likes" she thought she might be onto something — besides just flaunting her new-found fame to her three college- and high school-age children. She now has a prop shop where she brainstorms, scavenges and repurposes everything from borrowed shirts to a plastic children's pool to one of the family dogs to assemble scenes on her "stage" — the front porch of her house in a suburb outside Washington, DC.

"I could probably do this for the rest of my life," a smiling Kemble tells AFP. "This is my heaven, I'm like playing dress up on my front porch." The characters from pop culture and well-known movies all include messages that play on famous lines urging people to heed orders not to go out, to wash their hands and stay upbeat. ET the extraterrestrial urges people to "Stay home," and Waldo, the "lost" character of picture books with the iconic red and white striped shirt and funny hat says "I'm right here!" Kemble's children are sometimes recruited to help — though so far they have not appeared in any pictures. Daughter Ellie learned the hard way to ask questions before agreeing to loan any clothing to the project, after a favorite red sweater was cut up and turned into a wig for the Little Mermaid costume, whose message was "Kiss the girl — from afar".

Fighting depression under lockdown

Neighbors call out greetings as they walk down the street or honk as they go by. All the locals seem to know about the porch costumes or have seen them on social media, especially the Instagram account "erinsporchpics." Kemble waves and shouts back, always with big smile and a cheerful comment. But despite her upbeat exterior, she says she has suffered from depression most of her life, which is one reason behind her characters' upbeat messages.

She urged people to "Keep talking. Your mental health is



Erin Kemble wears an “Elf on the Shelf” costume.

so important!” on one sign, which accompanied her portrayal of an iconic scene from the 1989 John Cusack film “Say Anything.” “I’m very open and honest about that, and I’ve been treated all of my adult life,” she said of her depression, adding, “It’s something I know many, many people suffer from.” She said she hopes her displays give those people something to look forward to and a reminder that things will get better. “It’s keeping me sane.”

“If my little nonsense foolishness make someone laugh ... it’s OK, I don’t mind,” Kemble said. “You’ve got to have hope.” The dozens of positive comments show she is at least providing entertainment and a light-hearted moment amid the bad news surrounding COVID-19. “I’m stuck inside; I’ve got a crazy imagination. Why not do this, if this could benefit someone.” “Maybe I’ve been training for this my whole life.”—AFP



This handout picture from the Instagram account of Erin Kemble, shows her wearing a “Waldo” costume.



Erin Kemble wearing a “Little Miss Piggy” costume.



Erin Kemble carries a child’s wading pool as she demonstrates how she created a costume representing the character Violet Beauregarde from “Charlie and Chocolate Factory”.



This handout picture from the Instagram account of Erin Kemble, shows her wearing a “ET” costume.

‘Nordic Noir’ pioneer Maj Sjowall dead at 84

Maj Sjowall, one half of a Swedish crime-writing couple credited with inventing “Nordic Noir”, has died aged 84, her publisher said on Wednesday. Sjowall, a pioneer of gritty realism and an inspiration to modern crime writers, “passed away today after an extended period of illness,” Ann-Marie Skarp, head of publisher Piratforlaget, told AFP. With her partner Per Wahloo, who died in 1975, Sjowall penned a 10-book series centred on the dour, middle-aged and decidedly unheroic Martin Beck and his team of detectives in Stockholm’s National Homicide Bureau.

Books like “Roseanna”, “The Laughing Policeman” and “The Abominable Man,” featured tightly structured plots packed with realistic details, charting the unglamorous slog and grind of police work. “Her and Per Wahloo’s 10 novels about Martin Beck... will become classics and have inspired, I dare say, all now living authors of crime novels,” Skarp said.

Nordic Noir

The duo also penned the series decades before the likes of Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson made the genre of “Nordic Noir” into a worldwide hit. “They broke with the previous trends in crime fiction,” Henning Mankell wrote in an introduction to the 2006 English edition of “Roseanna”. His own Inspector Kurt Wallander series would owe much to Beck three decades later. Sjowall was “the giant on whose shoulders the titans of modern Scandi crime fiction stand,” Britain’s Daily Telegraph

wrote in 2015, in a story headlined “The couple who invented Nordic Noir”.

Both committed Marxists, they went beyond crime fiction, breaking new ground by carrying out a forensic examination of the failings of Swedish society. The modern themes they tackled included paedophilia, serial killers, the sex industry and suicide. “Through the eyes of Martin Beck and his colleagues, they held a mirror up to Swedish society at a time when the ideals of the welfare state were beginning to buckle under the realities of everyday life,” Scottish crime writer Val McDermid wrote in the introduction to the 2006 edition of “The Man Who Went Up In Smoke”.

Late night writing sessions

Born September 25, 1935 in Stockholm, Sjowall studied journalism and graphics. She worked as a translator, and art director, and as journalist for Swedish magazines and newspapers. It was through her work that she met Wahloo, a successful political journalist, in 1961. The two quickly became a couple and had two sons.

Then they decided to launch the Martin Beck series. After dinner and having put their sons to bed, they would sit opposite each other and write through the night, a chapter each. “We worked a lot with the style,” she explained to The Guardian newspaper in 2009. “We wanted to find a style which was not personally his, or not personally mine, but a style that was good for the books.” Before actually writing, the couple carefully planned their



This picture taken on September 15, 2015, shows Swedish crime author Maj Sjowall in Malmo, Sweden. —AFP

plots, travelling, taking hundreds of photographs, meeting people and drawing maps, Sjowall explained in a Q&A in the first book “Roseanna”.

After Wahloo’s death from cancer aged 48 in 1975 — weeks after the last book in the series, “The Terrorists”, was published — she continued working as a translator. She also collaborated on “The Woman Who Resembled Greta Garbo” with Dutch crime writer Tomas Ross in 1990. The Martin Beck books have been translated into 40 languages, according to news agency TT, and served as the source material for dozens of movies.—AFP

Lifestyle | Feature

Survival or duty: The unsung 'second-line' virus workers

Shopkeepers, dustmen, delivery people, cleaners, postmen — they're some of the jobs making life under lockdown possible. Often low paid, sometimes invisible or even scorned, these roles have today become essential in a world gripped by the coronavirus pandemic. AFP photographers have taken portraits of workers doing these jobs, whether to stave off hunger, or out of a sense of duty, feeling sacrificed or valued.

They're not applauded every night from balconies in

France or Italy like medics on the front line, but they have gained a new recognition as "second-line" workers in the fight against COVID-19. And sometimes they receive a "thank you" scribbled on a bin left out for pickup or a supermarket shopfront in appreciation. Without them, there would be nothing to eat, no communicating or getting around, no sanitisation or burials. For the most part, it's done without more than a mask, hand gel and distancing measures.

Around 50 workers in 25 countries agreed to be

photographed by AFP between April 18 and 25 at their workplace. From between grocery shelves, outside a butcher's or baker's, beside a bus or rubbish bin, in a kitchen or at a cemetery, they conveyed their vulnerability, anger, sense of mission or pride.

Survival

For some, it's about not going hungry at a time when the pandemic has torpedoed economies, sending millions into unemployment across the globe. Afghan



This combination of pictures created on April 26, 2020 during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic shows (starting from left top corner) Spanish Ramon Montesinos Roman, shepherd, posing for a picture in Ronda, Spain; Thierry Pauly, 54, garbage collector, in Mulhouse, France; Ecuadorean Alexis Pereira, worker at a cemetery in Guayaquil, Ecuador; Artem Simonov, 20, employee of a food delivery system, in Moscow; Mahesh, 39, vegetable vendor, in New Delhi; US Gregory Stark, 54, laundry shop employee in Miami, United States; Lebanese Tatiana Rcaiby, 36, pharmacist, in Byblos, Lebanon; Renata Gajic, 45, supermarket employee, in Mladenovac, Serbia; Ranjan Bind, 43, waste collector, in Faridabad, India; Italian Rosy Varrella, 55, newspapers kiosk owner, in Milan, Italy; Indian Rajeesh Babu, 45, police inspector, in Chennai, India; Mexican Armando Garcia, 39, dog walker, in Mexico City; British Robin Barclay, cleaning contractor, in Glasgow, Scotland; Indonesian Ika Sri Purnamaningsih, 41, obstetrician-gynaecologist, in Jakarta; Javorka Lazic, 35, baker, in Mladenovac, Serbia; Vera Dabevski, 44, pasta maker, in Belgrade; Lebanese Riyad, 30, gas station employee, in Amchit, Lebanon; Turkish Bulent Coban, 42, water distribution company employee, in Istanbul; Japanese Kunio Hayakawa, 72, fishmonger, in Tokyo; French Aline Alemi, 53, postwoman, in Angevillers, France; Spanish Xesc Bisbal, 51, gravedigger, in Algaida, Mallorca, Spain; Russian Alexander Germanovich, 26, municipal cleaning truck driver, in Moscow; Argentine Susana Tuara, 40, greengrocer, in Buenos Aires; Stoyanka Dimitrova, 49, tram driver, in Sofia and British Patrick Blake, 65, funeral director, in Derrylin, Northern Ireland. Ahead of May Day on May 1, 2020, AFP portrayed 55 workers defying the novel coronavirus around the world. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Zainab Sharifi, a 45-year-old mother-of-seven working at a Kabul bakery, said she didn't have a choice. "Hunger will kill my family before the coronavirus if I do not work," she told AFP. Some go despite the fear in their heart. "The risk is everywhere, it's a risk for everyone, because you're afraid to get infected and infect the others," said Ivorian Fatou Traore, 43, a cleaner at the Cremona hospital in northern Italy.

In Portugal, fishmonger Emilia Lomba, 64, talks of all the people with whom she interacts and the banknotes she touches every day at the market in Lisbon. She has to pay her bills, she said. Others fear they're being sacrificed by society.

"Who wants to work under these conditions?" asked Larissa Santana, 26, who sells a popular snack called acaraje from a street food stall in Salvador, northeastern Brazil. "But there is no other way. Work is at a shortage," said the mother of a three-year-old son.

Dressed in orange overalls, French rubbish collector Thierry Pauly, 54, continues his rounds in the eastern city of Mulhouse because of what he describes as his "professional conscience". But he's angry. His job is "still at risk but not recognized", he said.

A duty

Others feel duty-bound, such as those keeping public services running, like Bulgarian tram driver Stoyanka Dimitrova. "Someone has to do this," the 49-year-old told AFP in Sofia. "Everyone chooses his profession on his own and should carry his cross." People still need their mail, 53-year-old Aline Alemi, a postwoman in Hayange in eastern France, says bluntly. But she has adjusted her hours to run into fewer people and never hands over packages in person now.

Pulling up the shutters can feel like a personal act of civic responsibility in troubled times. Jackie Feeney's village store is the only one in Glenarm in Northern Ireland. It's "a lifeline for the community", she said. "Some are elderly and it's maybe their only chance to get out for essential items and a chat," she added. Even if it's through a perspex screen at the checkout. Some take it in their stride.

"It is quite normal for me to do my job with all the protective gear and showing responsibility towards the society, my family, and myself," Serbian bus driver Marjan Andjelkovic, 45, said in Belgrade. Similarly, funeral director Patrick Blake, 65, in Derrylin, Northern Ireland, said there's a duty "to deliver beyond the actual funeral arrangements, providing face-to-face access, advice and support for bereaved families".

Battling the virus

Working can also be a way of battling the virus. By delivering groceries in Halat, north of the Lebanese capital Beirut, Anas, a 29-year-old Syrian, feels like he's doing his bit "like doctors on the front line". In Rio de Janeiro, a task force has been set up to disinfect the roads of the Santa Marta favela by 39-year-old Thiago Firmino, born and raised there. "I choose to combat the problem rather than wait for the virus to knock on my door," he said.

Although he needs money for cleaning products, tools and protective gear, he says he's "prepared to take risks" to protect where his family and friends live. Sometimes the motive is an act of humanity. In Johannesburg, teacher Rize Jacobs, 63, volunteers at a kitchen preparing food for street children because she says to "be here, on earth, assisting where we can, to me it is a blessing".

In Glasgow too, Robin Barclay, 30, a cleaning company director, says "it is a natural step... to offer our sanitisation services for free to vulnerable areas and people". "It's strictly non-profit, it's about humanity and our duty of care to our community. Ultimately, if we can prevent just one person from contracting the virus, it will all be worth it."—AFP

Indian mechanic invents 'social distancing' motorbike

Self-made automobile engineer Partha Saha (left) tries his modified bike designed for social distancing.



An Indian school drop-out has built a motorbike with a one-meter gap between the rider and the passenger to drive home the importance of social distancing in the coronavirus pandemic. Partha Saha, 39, bought an old bike from a scrap dealer, removed the engine and cut the machine in two before affixing a rod slightly longer than a meter (3.2 feet) to connect the wheels.

"Now I can ride with my eight-year-old daughter while maintaining a safe distance," he told AFP from Agartala in the northeastern state of Tripura. Like other countries, the Indian government has imposed a nationwide lockdown and urged citizens to practice social distancing to curb the spread of the virus. As of yesterday, India had reported 33,050 cases of COVID-19, with 1,074 deaths.

When the nation extended its lockdown this month until at least May 3, Saha realized the battle against the virus

might not be over any time soon. He used up his meagre savings to make the vehicle, which he plans to use to ferry his daughter to and from school once the restrictions are lifted. "I didn't want her to take the school bus as it would be crowded," said Saha, who works in a TV repair shop. His new bike runs on battery power and has a top speed of 40 kilometers per hour (25 mph).

It takes three hours to charge the battery, which allows the bike to travel 80 kilometers (50 miles), Saha said. "The cost of charging it once comes to about 10 rupees (13 cents)," he added. The mechanic has already tried out his invention on the streets, leaving onlookers stunned at the design and drawing praise from Kumar Deb, Tripura's chief minister. "Necessity is the mother of invention! I congratulate Partha Saha... for making a unique motorcycle to create awareness during COVID-19 pandemic," Deb tweeted.—AFP

Swedish town to use 'stinky' fertilizer to deter spring revelers

The Swedish university town of Lund will spread foul smelling chicken fertilizer in its main park this week to deter revelers holding spring celebrations as part of efforts to curb the coronavirus outbreak, officials said Wednesday. City officials have asked residents to skip the traditional Walpurgis Eve celebrations on April 30, known in Sweden as Valborg, and plan to fence off the Lund city park.

But they told AFP they would also go a step further and take the opportunity to spread one ton of chicken droppings in the park. While giving the lawns a welcome dose of nutrition, they also hope it will keep at bay those who would otherwise be tempted to defy the coronavirus restrictions. "Well, chicken manure simply smells awful," Gustav Lundblad, chairman of the city's environment board, told AFP. "It's not very pleasant to sit around drinking beer in that smell," Lundblad added.

The park is a popular gathering spot for afternoon and early evening picnics on April 30, before the traditional bonfires later in the evening. Since the festivities — which can attract up to 30,000 visitors — are "spontaneous", the city cannot outright ban them but given the coronavirus outbreak, Lundblad said the city strongly wanted to avoid them. Lund is home to one of Sweden's largest universities and many of the municipality's some 125,000 inhabitants are students.—AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Harrison Ford investigated for latest aviation mishap

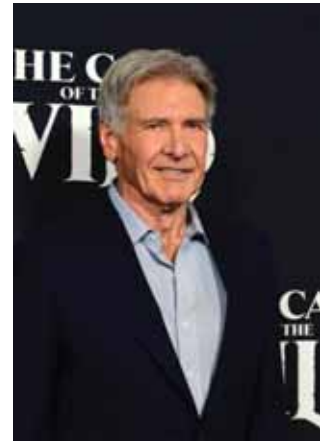
U.S. actor Harrison Ford piloted a plane across a runway as another aircraft was taking off, aviation officials said Wednesday, confirming they have opened an investigation. It is the latest aviation mishap for the 77-year-old “Indiana Jones” star and flying enthusiast, who misheard an air traffic instruction in the incident which did not result in any damage last Friday. “The FAA is investigating an incident in which the pilot of an Aviat Husky taxied across the runway... while another aircraft was performing a touch-and-go landing,” the Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement to AFP.

The planes were 3,600 feet apart during the incident at a Los Angeles county airport. Ford had been told to stop as the other plane practiced landing and immediately taking off, but instead he continued

across the runway. “Excuse me sir, I thought exactly the opposite. I’m terribly sorry,” Ford can be heard saying in an audio recording. Ford — one of the biggest names in Hollywood, who rose to fame as smuggler-pilot Han Solo in the blockbuster “Star Wars” movies — avoided punishment over a near-miss aviation incident at another southern California airport in 2017. Ford mistakenly landed a plane of the same model on a taxiway instead of the runway, passing over a Boeing 737 with 110 passengers and six crew on board.

Two years earlier, Ford performed an emergency landing after suffering engine failure in a World War II vintage aircraft, hitting a tree and crashing onto a California golf course. He suffered multiple injuries in the 2015 incident, including a broken pelvis and

ankle. Ford took his first flying lessons in college, gave up due to lack of money, but got back into it after becoming an established film star. Now with years of flying under his belt, Ford has been the owner of several planes, from two-seat bush aircraft to corporate jets. Representatives for Ford told AFP that “there was never any danger of a collision” in the latest incident.—AFP



In this file photo US actor Harrison Ford arrives for Disney’s “The Call of the Wild” premiere at El Capitan theatre in Hollywood, California.—AFP



People sit in their cars watching a movie at a new drive-in cinema on a airport apron area, where the planes take off and land, in Vilnius, Lithuania, as regular theaters are closed due to the coronavirus outbreak.—AP

Emptied by virus, Lithuanian airport turns into drive-in cinema

Hundreds of movie fans flocked to Lithuania’s main international airport on Wednesday night to a drive-in cinema created in the shadow of planes grounded by the coronavirus pandemic. Organizers of the Vilnius International Film Festival (Vilnius IFF) teamed up with the city’s airport to create the Aerocinema drive-in. They want to offer people the opportunity to go out for a movie amid the month-long coronavirus lockdown that has shuttered cinemas.

“We’re offering people a new type of travel through the cinema on the airport tarmac,” organizer Algirdas Ramaska told AFP, standing in front of a screen as tall as a five-storey building. “We were dreaming about it for a while, but it could only come true after aviation virtually came to a halt,” he added, referring to the flight ban imposed in mid-March in a bid to stem the spread of the deadly novel coronavirus. Social distancing measures were in place for Wednesday’s screening of this year’s Oscar-winning film, South Korea’s “Parasite”.

Around 150 cars on the airport tarmac were parked at least two meters apart, with a maximum of two people per vehicle. “I felt both strange and excited, when I saw the sun setting, a big screen and planes all around,” movie-goer

Jolita Vaitkute, 24, told AFP after the screening. “We can’t enjoy flights or cinema right now (under lockdown), but tonight we got both at the same time,” she added. Tickets go for 15 euros (\$16) per car with proceeds going to the Vilnius IFF, which operates on a non-profit basis. Last year, Vilnius airport served five million passengers but it has been eerily empty since mid-March when the Baltic EU state imposed its lockdown.

Although some passenger flights will resume on May 10, Ramaska said he expected the drive-in cinema to continue operation through May as air traffic will remain low for some time. Among the first EU members to ease lockdown restrictions, Lithuania has already reopened open-air restaurants and cafes, along with shops and libraries as infections slowed but cinemas remain closed. Vilnius mayor Remigijus Simasius has offered cafes free use of public spaces saying he wants the capital to become “one giant outdoor cafe”. The health ministry confirmed 1,375 cases of the novel coronavirus, including 45 deaths as of Wednesday in Lithuania, a eurozone nation of 2.8 million people.—AFP

Where are the female voices?
Vietnam author asks of war stories

Women bore much of the burden of the Vietnam War but their voices have long been absent from the trove of literature on the topic, says acclaimed author Nguyen Phan Que Mai. Speaking to AFP ahead of the 45th anniversary of the fall of Saigon Thursday, Que Mai says her new novel “The Mountains Sing” — written in English — aims to shine a light on the stories of women who not only endured and survived conflict, but had to rebuild shattered lives time and again. “I’ve read a lot of Vietnam war fiction in English and most of it is written in the voices of men,” adds the poet and writer.

“I grew up with incredible women around me,” she says, adding that while many sons and fathers lost their lives in combat, it was women who had to deal with the heartache and the consequences. “My childhood was full of images of women who were waiting for the return of their loved ones from the war. My village was basically empty of men and the women later had to carry on, had to raise the kids and survive,” she explains. “The Mountains Sing” is written from the perspective of a Vietnamese grandmother and her granddaughter. It tells the story of four generations of their family through much of the 20th century, spanning the French colonial period, the rise of communism, the war with America, to present day.

Novels such as “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien and Graham Greene’s “The Quiet American” have become classics but offer few details of the female experience. And Vietnam’s most celebrated novels on the topic, Viet Thanh Nguyen’s Pulitzer Prize winner “The Sympathizer” and Bao Ninh’s “The Sorrow of War” were written by men.

‘Invaders’

The 46-year-old wanted to take a fresh approach. “I wanted to show the Vietnam war and Vietnamese history from another angle, from the angle of Vietnamese women,” she says, adding: “I could see that women are the people who bear the burden of the war.” She believes it is vital to

help people see there’s more to the country than the war, hailing it as a place full of complexity, colors, culture.

Born in 1973, Que Mai spent most of her childhood in the south in the post-war years after her father, a teacher, was relocated from the north. They moved to the tip of the Mekong Delta in 1979, where the land was lush and fertile, but bullet shells had to be removed in order to plant rice, she recalls. Like many people at the time in Vietnam — which was under a US embargo — they were dirt poor and her family rarely had enough to eat. She rose every day at 4:30 am to catch shrimps in nearby rice fields before heading to school. After class, she would sell water spinach and cigarettes on the street.—AFP



This handout picture released to AFP by Vietnamese author Nguyen Phan Que Mai shows the writer posing for a photograph with copies of her novel “The Mountains Sing” in Pfaffenhofen, Germany.—AFP

The best board games for travel lovers

By Lonely Planet Writer Ben Buckner

You've got a copy of Risk or Sorry! Collecting dust on a shelf. Or maybe last Christmas' annual game of Monopoly led to tears and slammed doors. But we're here to tell you – the board game industry is in the midst of a full-fledged golden age, with innovative gameplay systems, polished production values and star designers. Here are some of our favorite modern classics for people who love travel – all are based on real places around the world. Each of these provides a level of depth you can't find in a simple 'roll-and-move' game, but they aren't rules-heavy or intimidating for first-timers. They're known as 'gateway' games, so step through one and explore.



Tokaido

The Tokaido road of Japan's Edo period was a seaside route between Kyoto and Edo (modern-day Tokyo). In this gorgeous game players are travelers walking from one city to the other, in search of the most fulfilling journey. You must decide whether you want to focus on seeing beautiful landscapes, collecting souvenirs, having encounters with locals, relaxing in the hot springs, visiting temples or eating the most delicious meals.

The traveler who is furthest back always has the next move. You can jump ahead to make sure you don't get blocked from an activ-

ity but if you do, you'll be stuck for a while. Despite the tricky decisions to make, this is a zen-like game with stunning watercolor-style artwork in a minimalist white aesthetic.

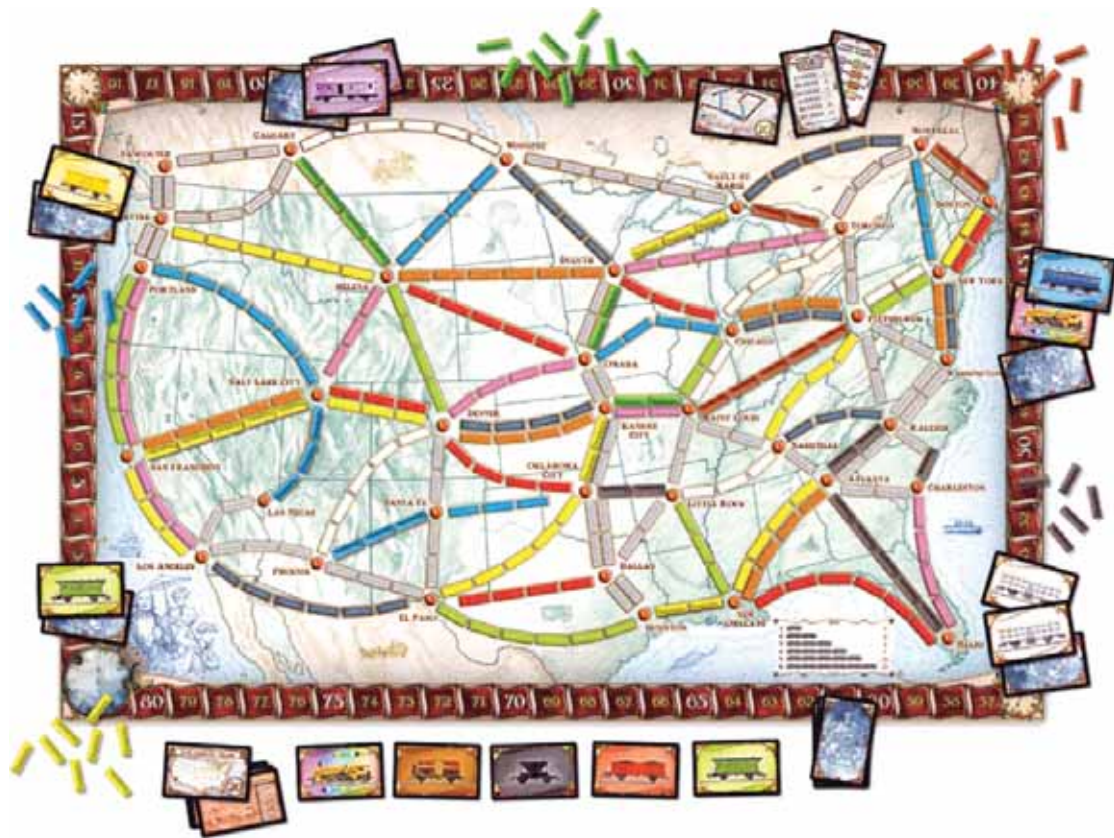
Designed by Antoine Bauza

2-5 players; 45 minutes

Age: 8+

Buy it on Amazon

Lifestyle | Feature



Ticket to Ride

With more than 6 million copies sold, this modern classic is quickly becoming as ubiquitous as Battleship or Clue. Players take on the role of railroad barons, laying down train tracks between cities to build the most extensive, or most efficient, network of stations. Collect sets of cards to claim routes – the longer the route the more points it's worth. Just make sure to connect the cities listed on your tickets before the end of the game, or you'll lose points instead of gaining them.

The original Ticket to Ride is played on a map of the United States. But there are many different expansions, with new maps and game tactics to explore. From the Nordic Countries to the Heart of Africa, there's a map for whichever part of the world interests you. For our taste, the stand-alone Ticket to Ride: Europe is the best combination of gameplay and travel theme.

Designed by Alan R. Moon
2-5 players
0-60 minutes
Age: 8+
Buy it on Amazon

Scotland Yard

This classic introduced the 'one-against-many' system that has become a modern board game staple. One player is Mister X, a criminal mastermind on the loose in London. All the other players work together as detectives, trying to corner Mister X. But it's not as easy as it sounds – Mister X spends most of the game in hiding, and only shows himself on rare occasions.

The board for Scotland Yard is a

map of London, with short taxi routes, longer bus routes and huge underground routes connecting spots all over the city. Detectives must communicate, use logic, and spend their transport tickets wisely in order to put the cuffs on Mister X. It's a high-pressure thrill for detective and criminal alike, and even highlights some of London's most iconic landmarks.

3-6 players
45 minutes
Age: 10+
Buy it on Amazon



Carcassonne

Carcassonne is a city in southern France with a fortified citadel dating back to the Gallo-Roman period. It was a key strategic point between the Atlantic and Mediterranean for centuries. In this award-winner, players take turns laying tiles with bits of roads, walled towns, fields and cloisters on them. When you place a tile, it must match up with the tiles on every side. You may also choose to put your own colored 'meeple' on a tile you place – once a feature is completed, any meeples on those tiles score points for the players who placed them.

As the tiled play area gets bigger and bigger, the extent of the region and its connecting roads becomes more and more impressive. And once you've mastered the base game, there are dozens of expansions to add everything from rivers to bazaars.

Designed by Klaus-Jürgen Wrede
2-5 players
30-45 minutes
Age: 8+
Buy it on Amazon





7 Wonders

The Pyramids of Giza; The Colossus of Rhodes; The Lighthouse of Alexandria – these were some of the real-life wonders of the ancient world. Take control of one of these regions and decide how you want to build your city. Will you put your resources toward building your wonder and other civic structures? Maybe you want your city to be known for its scientific discoveries. Or perhaps you will invite commerce – or war – with your neighbors.

At the beginning of each “age,” or round, everyone will

have a hand of seven cards. You’ll choose one to add to your city, then pass the rest to your neighbor. Once you receive your new cards, you’ll do it all over again until all cards have been put into play. After three ages, points are scored in many different ways, depending on what kind of city you have built.

Designed by Antoine Bauza;

3-7 players

30 minutes

Age: 10+

Buy it on Amazon



Jamaica

If you’re just dying to chuck some dice, this gorgeously illustrated buccaneer adventure is a more strategic spin on the old roll-and-move system. Race around the island of Jamaica as one of several real-life pirates of the Caribbean. Along the way feel free to steal some treasure and battle your opponents.

You only have a few holds in your ship’s hull for food for your crew, gunpowder for your cannons and those all-important doubloons, so you’ll have to decide what to keep and what to throw overboard. Because it’s not only about who finishes the race first, it’s about who has the most gold when they do.

Designed by Malcolm Braff, Bruno Cathala and Sébastien Pauchon

2-6 players

30-60 minutes

Age: 8+

Buy it on Amazon.

Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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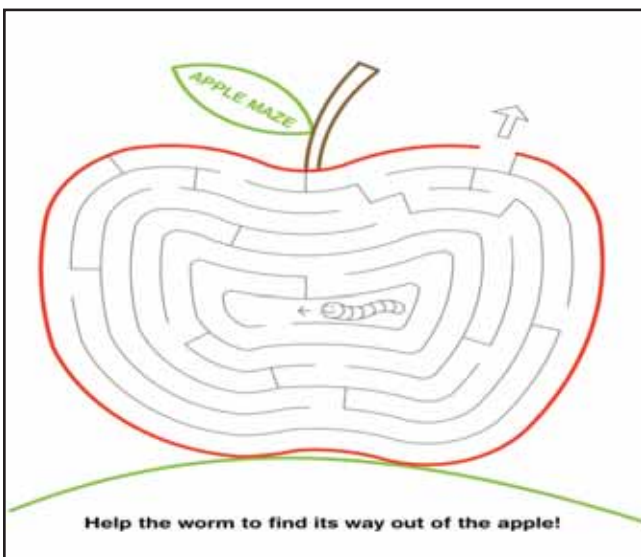
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Yesterday's Solution

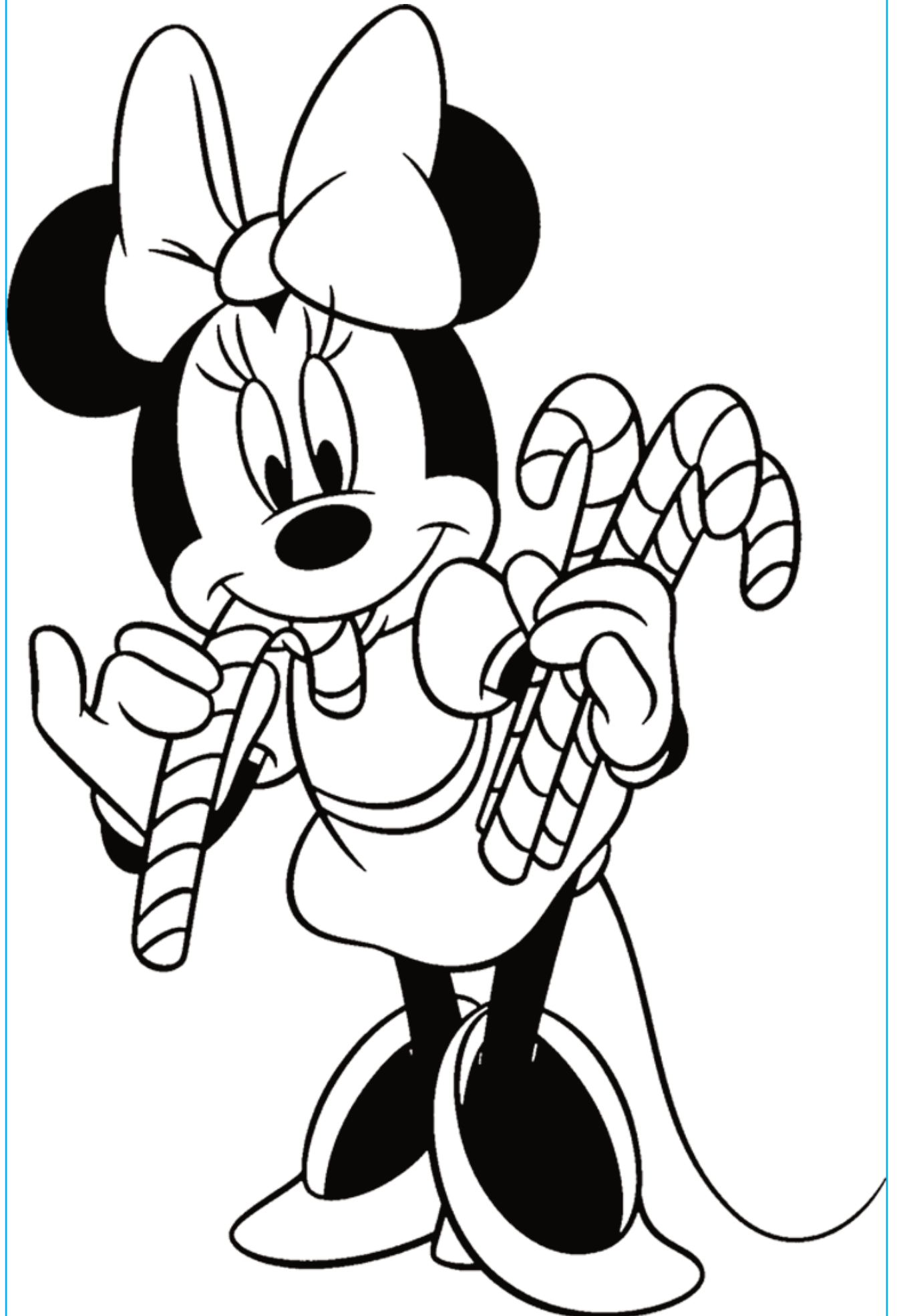
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very hard

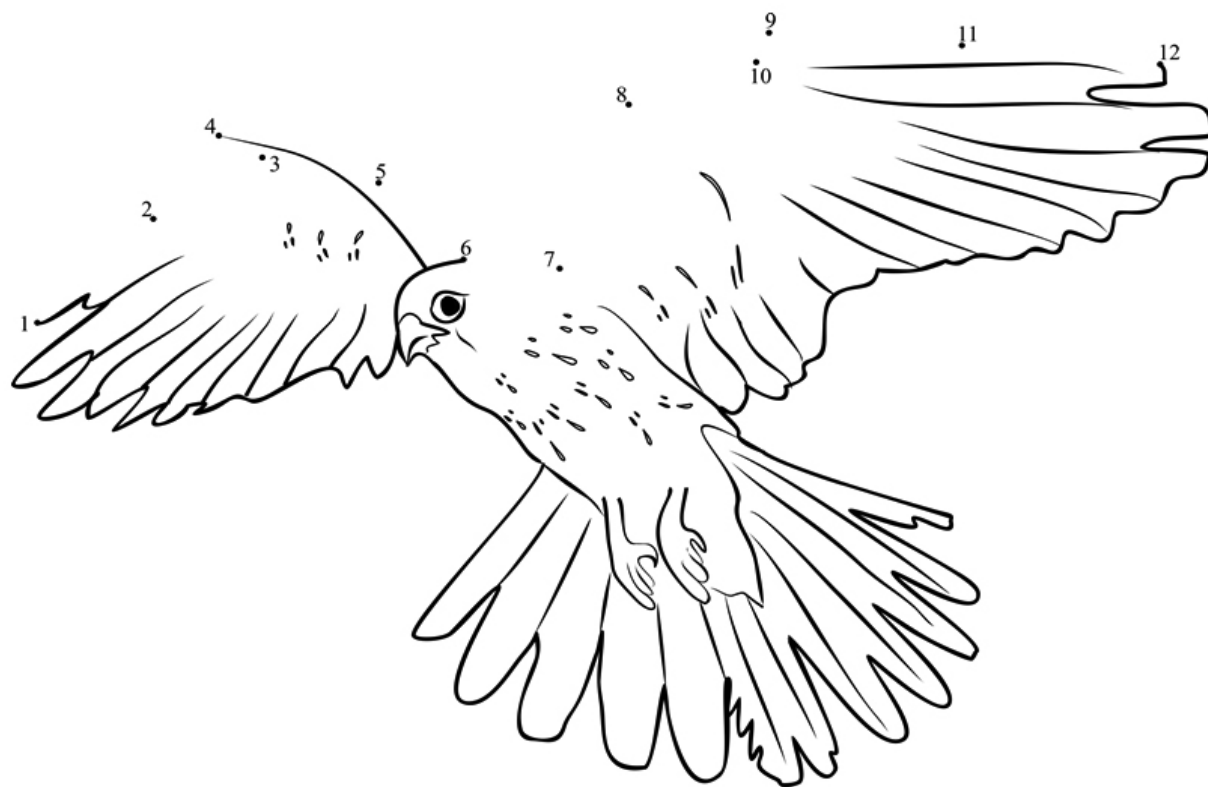
Kids Mazes



Color It



Join the dots



DIRECTIONS:
Find and circle the ALL CAP NAMES in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.

Film Directors Word Search

- Woody ALLEN
- Wes ANDERSON
- Ingmar BERGMAN
- Tim BURTON
- James CAMERON
- Frank CAPRA
- Charlie CHAPLIN
- Joel COEN
- Francis Ford COPPOLA

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| Clint EASTWOOD | Sidney LUMET |
| Federico FELLINI | David LYNCH |
| John FORD | Roman POLANSKI |
| Howard HAWKS | Martin SCORSESE |
| Werner HERZOG | Ridley SCOTT |
| Alfred HITCHCOCK | Steven SPIELBERG |
| Buster KEATON | Quentin TARANTINO |
| Stanley KUBRICK | Francis TRUFFAUT |
| Spike LEE | Orson WELLES |
| George LUCAS | Billy WILDER |

Find the way



CLINIC PAGE



Kuwait Times

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Friday, May 1, 2020

DR. MOHAMMAD AL HAJRY
 Canadian Board of Otolaryngology
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 Fellow of Royal College of Surgeons-Canada
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- Diagnosis & Treatment of Head and Neck benign & malignant tumors.

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

ACADAMIC CERTIFICATES:

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

SPECIALIZED IN:

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SHARD, Ahmad Alisher st., Building 88, Floor 11.
 Tel: (+965) 22060777.
 @DrFahadMed, @RenovaBB, @DarAlShifaBB
 Email: drfahadmed@beautybeyont.com.kw
 www.beautybeyont.com.kw

DR KHALED ALMERRI
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 Department: Heart & Vascular Center

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- 4-Diagnosis and treatment of high blood pressure and high cholesterol.
- 5- Diagnosis and treatment of syncope, palpitations and cardiac arrhythmias.
- 6- Non-invasive diagnostic procedures echocardiography, exercise stress test, and 24 hour blood pressure and Holter monitoring

Dr. Hamoud Abdullah Alarouj
 ENT Consultant, Laryngologist

- ◆ Kuwait Board of Otolaryngology.
- ◆ Laryngology Fellowship, McGill University- Canada.
- ◆ Fellow of the European Board of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck surgery.
- ◆ Member of the American Academy of Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery.
- ◆ Member of the British Laryngological Association.
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Stars

STAR TRACK

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

The astral energy is encouraging you to open up more to your world, culture, and ways of thinking, Aries. You don't have to go off alone in the desert to reinvent everything. For you, this would be the easy way out, because it would allow you to hide! Develop your curiosity about what exists in this society. Your opinion will carry weight later on.

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

How focused you are, Taurus! You're so calm and collected. Of course, the mood is especially hospitable to sobriety, cooperation, and hard work. The horizon is clear, and you have all the information you require to navigate the seas of life. All you need is a little more faith and courage. You've got this!

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

Today, Gemini, you can at last express the secrets that have been troubling you. You may have previously been seething with anger inside and afraid to let it show for fear of permanently damaging a relationship. Now that you've cooled off, you may be in a position to better express yourself to this person without harming your connection. Or you may be nursing a massive case of "the feels" for some lucky special someone.

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

Your mind is in great turmoil right now, Cancer, so it isn't surprising that you can't pay much attention to anything. Due to recent events, it's entirely possible that your concept of the world has been inexorably changed and you see your love life and career with new eyes. Even so, you feel compelled to pick up the pieces of the past and save them. Figure out what is salvageable and what is best left behind.

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

The day will be fairly quiet for you, Leo. You're likely to yoke yourself to a task and continue working on it until evening. If someone tries to entice you into procrastination or distraction, you'll brush them off as easily as a mosquito buzzing in your ear. This is one day when you should follow your instincts, keep your head down, and focus on the task at hand.

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

You should use the day to ponder your professional future, Virgo. Many forces seem to be working together to clarify your ideas on the subject. Rather than rebelling at the slightest provocation, as you've been known to do in the past, refocusing your energy to concentrate on the basic material needs of you and your family will be a much more productive use of your time.

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

Today is no time for dreaming, Libra! Quite the contrary. You can expect to have to settle several minor technical problems involving communications or transmissions. On the whole, it will be a somewhat trying day, but at least your mind will be occupied, leaving no room for the difficult internal questions that have been bothering you so much lately.

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

Are you getting hit with obstacles, Scorpio? Could it be that you simply need to factor in more time to complete the monumental tasks you take on? This might be difficult for you to tolerate. You don't know how to deal with times like these when you must continue doing the same thing over and over until you get results. There's a lesson here for you. It can't remember that patience is a virtue.

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

Are you having some problems with authority, Sagittarius? Are you having a hard time making yourself understood? If so, have you thought about explaining your projects in detail to the people that you hope will follow you in your adventure? You can't expect others to follow you blindly. They, too, have their lives to live, as well as their own objectives and priorities to tend to.

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

Yes, Capricorn, your projects have taken some time to get set up. This is because you haven't been concentrating hard enough. You are doing several things at once, with the result that things have been moving more slowly than you expected. Your change in orientation requires you to focus your energy in a single direction. However, the question remains - what direction?

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

You don't have to create everything alone, Aquarius. Life isn't a one-person show. To live life fully, you must participate, help others, and when needed, ask for their help in return. That's what being part of a team, and indeed, being a human being is all about. There are things about ourselves we can only learn when interacting with others. There is inspiration, humor, and wisdom to be drawn from making yourself available, and yes at times vulnerable, to others.

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

When we think we have found our path, we naturally want to start to walk down it, Pisces. Don't be afraid if you haven't fully mastered your craft yet, or aren't a top expert in your field. Mastery and expertise come with taking things one step and one day at a time. Stay your course! If you keep your head down and keep working, instead of constantly looking at your far off destination, you will be surprised at how far you get. Desire is what creates aptitude, not the reverse.

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	00226	Mali	00223
Burundi	00257	Malta	00356
Cambodia	00855	Marshall Islands	00692
Cameroon	00237	Martinique	00596
Canada	001	Mauritania	00222
Cape Verde	00238	Mauritius	00230
Cayman Islands	001345	Mayotte	00269
Central African Republic	00236	Mexico	0052
Chad	00235	Micronesia	00691
Chile	0056	Moldova	00373
China	0086	Monaco	00377
Colombia	0057	Mongolia	00976
Comoros	00269	Montserrat	001664
Congo	00242	Morocco	00212
Cook Islands	00682	Mozambique	00258
Costa Rica	00506	Myanmar (Burma)	0095
Croatia	00385	Namibia	00264
Cuba	0053	Nepal	00977
Cyprus	00357	Netherlands (Holland)	0031
Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
Czech Republic	00420	New Caledonia	00687
Denmark	0045	New Zealand	0064
Diego Garcia	00246	Nicaragua	00505
Djibouti	00253	Niger	00227
Dominica	001767	Nigeria	00234
Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
Egypt	0020	Northern Ireland (UK)	0044
El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
England (UK)	0044	Norway	0047
Equatorial Guinea	00240	Oman	00968
Eritrea	00291	Pakistan	0092
Estonia	00372	Palau	00680
Ethiopia	00251	Panama	00507
Falkland Islands	00500	Papua New Guinea	00675
Faroe Islands	00298	Paraguay	00595
Fiji	00679	Peru	0051
Finland	00358	Philippines	0063
France	0033	Poland	0048
French Guiana	00594	Portugal	00351
French Polynesia	00689	Puerto Rico	001787
Gabon	00241	Qatar	00974
Gambia	00220	Romania	0040
Georgia	00995	Russian Federation	007
Germany	0049	Rwanda	00250
Ghana	00233	Saint Helena	00290
Gibraltar	00350	Saint Kitts	001869
Greece	0030	Saint Lucia	001758
Greenland	00299	Saint Pierre	00508
Grenada	001473	Saint Vincent	001784
Guadeloupe	00590	Samoa US	00684
Guam	001671	Samoa West	00685
Guatemala	00502	San Marino	00378
Guinea	00224	Sao Tome	00239
Guyana	00592	Saudi Arabia	00966
Haiti	00509	Scotland (UK)	0044
Holland (Netherlands)	0031	Senegal	00221
Honduras	00504	Seychelles	00284
Hong Kong	00852	Sierra Leone	00232
Hungary	0036	Singapore	0065
Ibiza (Spain)	0034	Slovakia	00421
Iceland	00354	Slovenia	00386
India	0091	Solomon Islands	00677
Indian Ocean	00873	Somalia	00252
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Business

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2020

34 In riot-hit Lebanon, central bank governor blames govt leaders



35 France in recession as virus-hit economy shrinks 5.8% in Q1



36 Chinese factories struggle to fire as export orders collapse



WASHINGTON: A man holds a historic American flag as people participate in a "Let Us Fish" rally on Lake Union to support their right to fish during the novel coronavirus outbreak in Seattle, Washington. The pandemic ended a decade of US economic expansion but the Federal Reserve pledged to use every tool it has to help fuel a recovery. — AFP

COVID-19 ends decade of US growth

Fed warns of more virus hardship ahead

WASHINGTON: The coronavirus pandemic ended a decade of US economic expansion, but the Federal Reserve pledged Wednesday to use every tool it has to help fuel a recovery. The central bank warned that the virus continues to pose "considerable risks" to the economy, which after a 4.8 percent contraction in the first three months of the year likely will see an "unprecedented" decline in the second quarter.

And after record job losses in just a few weeks, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell warned that unemployment will take time to come down to the low level of recent years. The GDP decline in the January-March period—the biggest fall in 12 years—came after the pandemic forced businesses to close and halted

purchases and investments, the Commerce Department said Wednesday.

The grim numbers underscore the damage done to the world's largest economy by the pandemic, which already has caused an estimated 26 million job losses and sent Congress and President Donald Trump scrambling to cut the losses. The coronavirus outbreak in United States has grown into the world's largest and deadliest, with the country's caseload rising to 1,034,884 and deaths hitting 60,316 after surpassing the death toll from the Vietnam War on Tuesday.

The economic contraction was all the more worrying since the most strict business shutdowns and stay-at-home orders did not occur until the final weeks of March. The Commerce

Department acknowledged that it could not quantify the full economic effects of the virus.

Powell warned that "economic activity will likely drop at an unprecedented rate in the second quarter" at a rate "worse than we've seen." Private sector economists are predicting a decline in growth by as much as 40 percent in the second quarter amid the collapse in consumer spending and business investment.

Job losses have hit 26 million since mid-March, and companies are beginning to make more permanent cuts due to the uncertain outlook, including aerospace giant Boeing, which plans to slash 10 percent of its workforce. It will take "some time to get back to anything nearly resembling full employment," Powell said. — AFP

ABK names new top executives

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) approved Ahli Bank of Kuwait's request to appoint three top executives. In this respect, Abdullah Mohammad Al-Sumait has been named as the deputy CEO for the ABK group, according to a stock exchange statement on Wednesday. Luay Makames will be the CEO of ABK Kuwait, while Karl Stumke will become the CEO of ABK UAE.

The announcement has no material impact on ABK's financial position, the statement added. It is worth mentioning that in the fiscal year (FY) 2019, ABK reported KD 28.7 million profits.

Business

In riot-hit Lebanon, central bank governor blames govt leaders

Rioters torch banks, smash ATMs amid economic crisis

BEIRUT: Clashes broke out between protesters and the Lebanese army Wednesday, hours after the under-fire central bank chief blamed a lack of government reforms for a spiraling economic crisis that has sparked demonstrations despite a coronavirus lockdown. Central bank governor Riad Salameh was speaking after two nights of street clashes left one man dead and wounded dozens of protesters and troops, with rioters torching bank branches and smashing ATM machines. Lebanon is grappling with its worst economic turmoil since the 1975-1990 civil war, now compounded by a lockdown to halt the stem of the novel coronavirus.

A plummeting currency and fast-rising prices have reignited protests that saw one man killed in Tripoli after being struck by a bullet fired by a soldier in clashes late Monday. Dozens of protesters gathered again Wednesday evening in the northern city.

In the Mina district, some set alight rubbish bins and threw stones and Molotov cocktails at the army, who responded with tear gas, an AFP correspondent said. In the southern port city of Sidon, local media reported that demonstrators threw Molotov cocktails and firecrackers at the central bank branch in the city.

Responding to the mounting anger earlier Wednesday, Salameh in a rare televised address defended the central bank, saying “we funded part of the state’s needs”, as have international donors. “We did all this because the state had

promised reforms, which were not translated into reality for political reasons,” he said, alluding to lengthy stretches in recent years when Lebanon lacked a functioning government, president or even parliament. “I don’t know if there was real will for the reforms, but the central bank has always asked for them.”

Debt-burdened Lebanon has been rocked by a series of political crises in recent years, before an economic crunch helped set off unprecedented cross-sectarian mass protests in October and unseated the last government. The demonstrations had largely petered out after a new cabinet was tasked earlier this year with implementing urgent reforms to unlock billions in international aid. Then the small Mediterranean country largely closed down to tackle the virus that has infected 721 people and killed 24.

‘Can’t feed my children’

But in recent days, and in defiance of the ongoing lockdown, the demonstrators have hit the streets again, railing against a sharp devaluation and stinging price hikes. On Wednesday, a few hundred people gathered to protest in the impoverished city of Tripoli. “I’m out in the street because I’m unemployed and I can no longer feed my three children,” 34-year-old Muhammad Khalil said.

“We’ve lost all our spending power and the state hasn’t got our back,” he told AFP.

The exchange rate, long pegged at 1,507



SIDON: A Lebanese protester launches a bottle bomb toward the entrance of a bank in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon late on Wednesday as anger over a spiraling economic crisis in the country re-energized a months-old anti-government movement in defiance of a coronavirus lockdown. — AFP

Lebanese pounds to the dollar, has soared to more than 4,000 pounds in recent days. Prices have risen by 55 percent, while 45 percent of the population now lives below the poverty line, according to government estimates.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab on Wednesday said the government was exerting “great efforts to try to alleviate the crisis”, and promised to in-

crease handouts to the most needy. Human Rights Watch criticized the army’s use of force in Tripoli on Monday night.

“The army’s unjustified use of lethal force has further enflamed the situation and cost the life of one young man who was demanding his rights,” HRW Lebanon researcher Aya Majzoub said. — AFP

Equities, crude surge in Asia on hopes of virus cure

HONG KONG: Asian markets rallied again and oil prices built on the previous day’s surge as investors began to see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel in the fight against coronavirus, following news of a possible breakthrough in the search for a treatment.

Top US epidemiologist Anthony Fauci’s comments that Gilead Science’s remdesivir “has a clear-cut, significant, positive effect in diminishing the time to recovery” fanned hopes that lockdowns—already being loosened in some nations—could be lifted more quickly, allowing people back to work to kickstart the battered economy. The announcement allowed investors to look past data showing the US economy had contracted 4.8 percent in the first quarter, its worst performance in a decade, and the Federal Reserve’s warning that it would likely tank even further in April-June.

The central bank did provide some support, though, by pledging to keep interest rates at zero until the economy has weathered the crisis and is ready to resume growth. Yesterday France said its economy had fared even worse and contracted 5.8 percent. — AFP

Facebook surges on user growth

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook on Wednesday reported a sharp jump in usage as the global pandemic unfolded, in a quarterly update that sparked a rally in shares of the social network despite its warning of turbulence in the coming months. Shares climbed some 10 percent after Facebook reported a profit of \$4.9 billion on revenue that grew 17 percent to \$17.4 billion during the first three months of this year.

Chief executive Mark Zuckerberg vowed to keep pouring money into social networking “needs” revealed by the crisis despite uncertainty about the impact of the health emergency on the economy and its business. “I think in some ways that’s an opportunity and in other ways I think it’s a responsibility to keep on investing in the economic recovery,” he told analysts on an earnings call.

Ranks of monthly active users grew 10 percent to 2.6 billion for its core Facebook social network, and the user count for its “family” of apps including Instagram and WhatsApp hit three billion.

But Facebook warned of “unprecedented uncertainty” about the future of its business as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. “The impact on our business has been significant and I remain very concerned that this health emergency and therefore the economic fallout will last longer than people are currently anticipating,” Zuckerberg said.

Facebook said it saw “significant reduction” in demand for advertising as well as a drop in ad prices during the last three weeks



A Facebook logo is displayed on a mobile phone screen next to a coronavirus COVID-19 illustration in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

of the quarter. A steep decrease in advertising revenue in March was followed by signs of stability, according to the social network. Ad revenue—the bulk of Facebook revenues—has been relatively flat in April compared to the same period last year, according to the social network.

The California tech giant offered no specific outlook for the current quarter because of the rapidly shifting conditions. “The April trends reflect weakness across all of our user geographies as most of our major countries have had some sort of shelter-in-place guidelines in effect,” Facebook said. Travel and car advertising slumped, while ads related to gaming and e-commerce rose, according to executives. The California-based company noted that use of the social network may ebb a bit as lockdown restrictions ease. “I don’t expect that this exact spike in usage will sustain over a longer period of time,” Zuckerberg said. — AFP

Business

France in recession as virus-hit economy shrinks 5.8% in Q1

Spain economy contracts by 5.2% in Q1

PARIS/MADRID: The French economy officially fell into recession after contracting 5.8 percent in the first quarter, the national statistics office said yesterday, underscoring the massive toll of the country's nationwide shutdown to curb the coronavirus outbreak. Even though the business closures and stay-at-home orders were imposed only the final two weeks of the quarter, the drop-off in activity was a hammer blow that has put more than half of France's private-sector employees out of work.

It was the worst quarterly performance since the Insee statistics agency began charting French gross domestic product in 1949, and follows a 0.1-percent decline in the last quarter of 2019 — meeting the definition of a recession as two consecutive quarters of contraction. Insee said the drop was due mainly to the halt of non-essential activities since mid-March, underscoring a 7.3-percent collapse in household spending on goods—a drop that reached 17.9 percent in March alone.

The government has already said it expects an eight-percent contraction for the French economy this year as it prepares to start lifting the lockdown on May 11. It has announced 110 billion euros (\$120 billion) in financial aid and other relief for businesses, and President Emmanuel Macron has vowed that “no company would be abandoned to the risk of bankruptcy.”

But Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire told lawmakers Wednesday that “we must be realistic about

the fact that once the shock has been absorbed,” there is a risk of a “cascade of failures” and a “severe” impact on unemployment. In addition to the aid package, the government is guaranteeing up to 300 billion euros in loans for affected businesses.

Health vs growth

Entire sectors of the French economy have effectively been shut down, the Labour Ministry says, with nine out of ten workers in hotels and restaurants, as well as in construction now unemployed. Business groups have warned that even with the loans and financial relief such as delayed payment of payroll taxes and other charges, thousands of small and midsize companies could be facing bankruptcy this year.

The government announced this week that if encouraging declines in COVID-19 cases continue, many businesses will be allowed to open on May 11, and some children will progressively start returning to class. But bars, restaurants and cinemas will remain closed until June at the earliest, and companies are being urged to keep their employees working from home, to avoid a second wave of coronavirus deaths. “We must protect the French without immobilizing France to the point that it collapses,” Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said in announcing the measures this week.

The toll has also been heavy on France's blue-chip companies, with top bank Societe General re-



This file photograph taken on March 25, 2020, shows buildings of the business district of La Defense, on the outskirts of Paris, as the country is under lockdown to attempt to halt the spread of COVID-19 (novel coronavirus). —AFP

porting Thursday a first-quarter loss of 326 million euros, its first quarterly loss since 2012.

The bank said it would cut costs by an additional 600 to 700 million euros this year to weather the crisis. Tyre giant Michelin said late Wednesday that its sales slid 8.3 percent in the quarter to 5.3 billion euros, reflecting the worldwide slump in vehicle sales and construction activity.

Spanish woes

The Spanish economy contracted by 5.2 percent in the first quarter, provisional figures by national statistics agency INE showed yesterday, as a coronavirus lockdown imposed in mid-March paralyzed businesses. By comparison, Spain's gross domestic product had expanded by 0.4 percent in the final quarter of 2019 due mainly to a strong export performance. —AFP

Finance, tech firms on hiring spree amid crisis

LONDON: The coronavirus is roiling global job markets, but the picture is not all gloomy. Finance, technology and consumer goods firms are hiring tens of thousands in the United States and other countries, according to data from Microsoft Corp's professional networking site LinkedIn.

Across seven countries in North America, Europe and Asia, healthcare providers are among the busiest recruiters given the ongoing battle against the novel coronavirus, which has killed over 200,000 people and infected over 3 million people worldwide, LinkedIn said. But lifestyle changes during lockdown are also driving demand for financial consultants, factory workers, animators and game designers, and delivery workers. Overall, the hiring rate has plunged in the first quarter from the year-ago period, and in late April remains lower than a year ago across most countries surveyed by the platform. But the data offer a glimmer of hope with a gradual uptick in China, where the coronavirus emerged last year and which leads the world in surfacing from a months-long lockdown.

LinkedIn, with over 690 million users worldwide, counts new hires when people add a new employer to their profile. The rate is the number of new hires divided by the total number of LinkedIn members in a country. —Reuters

ECB under pressure to act again

FRANKFURT: Just weeks after unveiling a massive stimulus scheme, the European Central Bank is under pressure to deploy even more firepower yesterday to prop up an economy that could shrink by a tenth this year. As it prints cash at a record pace to soak up ballooning state debt during the coronavirus pandemic, the ECB is on its way to exhausting its quota of bond buying early.

This may raise doubts down the line about how committed it is to helping the euro zone through the worst economic crisis for decades and may encourage it to boost its support, also to keep pace with an increasingly interventionist US Federal Reserve. However, policymakers are also keen to keep some pressure on the bloc's political leadership, which has so far fumbled its fiscal response, leaving the ECB in a familiar role as the currency union's chief crisis fighter.

The dilemma suggests ECB policymakers will discuss expanding stimulus, although a big move is unlikely to come until later — perhaps in June — when the extent of the economic damage will be easier to quantify. By the ECB's next regular meeting on June 4, the outlines of a so far elusive political deal on a trillion euro reconstruction fund should also be apparent, making it easier for the ECB to do its part. “It is more likely that the ECB could sit on its hands in order to keep up the pressure on European governments to adopt further aid packages or financial-solidarity measures,” Sophia Oertmann, an analyst at DZ Bank, said. The ECB has already deployed 125 billion euros (\$135.7 billion) to buy assets in just the past four weeks and is still struggling to bring down the borrowing costs of the bloc's lowest-rated governments, suggesting its 1.1 tril-



In this file photo, the headquarters of the European Central Bank (ECB) on the banks of the river Main and the banking district (in background) are pictured in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. —AFP

lion euro firepower could be exhausted by mid-autumn.

But expanding the scheme now would be more a signal than a necessity, and a few well-chosen words by ECB chief Christine Lagarde could prop up market confidence even without an actual decision.

The Fed also stayed put on Wednesday but left the door open to more monetary easing and it dampened expectations for a quick economic recovery from the coronavirus crisis. The ECB announces its policy decision at 1145 GMT, followed by Lagarde's news conference at 1230 GMT. Policymakers will meet through a video conference and Lagarde will hold an online news conference. —Reuters

Business

Chinese factories struggle to fire as export orders collapse

Twin surveys show a full-blown recovery appears some way off

BEIJING: China's factories suffered a collapse in export orders in April, twin surveys showed, suggesting a full-blown recovery appeared some way off as the coronavirus health crisis shut down large parts of the world economy. The sobering result comes amid moves by major nations to ease up on lockdowns, underlining the stiff challenges facing businesses as policymakers brace for the worst global slump since the Great Depression.

China's official Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) eased to 50.8 in April from 52 in March, the National Bureau of Statistics said yesterday, but stayed above the neutral 50-point mark that separates growth from contraction on a monthly basis. Analysts polled by Reuters had expected a PMI reading of 51. Worryingly, a sub-index of export orders for the world's biggest exporter dived to 33.5 in April from 46.4 in March with some factories even having their orders cancelled after reopening, said Zhao Qinghe, senior statistician at the NBS.

Export orders in the private Caixin/Markit Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) survey, also released on Thursday, contracted at the fastest pace since global financial crisis. The survey, which focuses mostly on small and export-oriented businesses, showed activity for Chinese factories

unexpectedly shrank this month. "It is still too early to conclude that the Chinese economy is growing again," said Iris Pang, Greater China chief economist at ING.

"The Western world has yet to relax some of its city lockdowns. And even after the lockdowns are relaxed, it is uncertain when demand will return to pre-Covid levels due to strict social distancing measures implemented domestically and in foreign economies."

With the coronavirus largely under control domestically, China's economy has begun to open up again as authorities loosen lockdown restrictions. But major economies, including the United States and Europe, remain in the grip of the pandemic amid mounting infections and deaths. Analysts warn the rest of the year will be bumpy for businesses and consumers in China, especially due to depressed external demand and mounting job losses. "The market's optimism of a quick recovery in China is fading," Nomura analysts said in a note. "We expect export growth to slump further to -30.0 percent in Q2 from -13.3 percent y-o-y in Q1 and real GDP growth to remain negative at -0.5 percent y-o-y in Q2."

China's economy took a heavy blow in the first



HEBEI: A worker producing baby carriages at a factory in Handan in China's northern Hebei province. Chinese factory activity continued to expand in April, data showed yesterday, but analysts warned that the outlook remained clouded by battered overseas demand as the rest of the world struggles to overcome the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

quarter, shrinking an annual 6.8 percent, the first contraction since current quarterly records began almost 30 years ago. "The survey shows that as many as 57.7 percent of the factories surveyed

have reported a lack of orders. Some have said market demand is tepid, product sales are difficult and it will take time for orders to come back again," NBS' Zhao said. —Reuters

Microsoft sees digital reboot from pandemic

WASHINGTON: Microsoft said Wednesday profits rose sharply in the just-ended quarter as it scrambled to keep its customers connected during the coronavirus lockdowns. The US technology giant said the full impact of the pandemic was not reflected in its results for the fiscal third quarter to March 31. But it said it was forced to adapt quickly as businesses and consumers moved into lockdown due to the global health emergency.

"We've seen two years' worth of digital transformation in two months," chief executive Satya Nadella said. "From remote teamwork and learning, to sales and customer service, to critical cloud infrastructure and security—we are working alongside customers every day to help them adapt and stay open for business in a world of remote everything."

Microsoft said profits in the quarter rose 22 percent from a year ago to \$10.8 billion. Shares rose three percent in after-hours trade in Microsoft, which is the most valuable tech firm with a market capitalization of more than \$1.3 billion. The update showed revenue rose 15 percent to \$35 billion with "minimal net impact" from the COVID-19 outbreak.

Microsoft, which has shifted its focus in recent years from consumer to business services, said it saw gains in its Office commercial and cloud revenues of 13 percent. Its "intelligent cloud" which includes its Azure platform for enterprise, saw a 27 percent jump in revenue to \$12.3 billion. —AFP

Boeing to cut staff, output as virus hits airlines

NEW YORK: Boeing announced sweeping cost-cutting measures Wednesday as it reported a first-quarter loss of \$641 million after suffering a damaging hit to the airline business from the coronavirus pandemic. The aerospace giant plans to reduce its workforce by 10 percent through voluntary and involuntary layoffs, Chief Executive David Calhoun said in a message to employees that accompanied an earnings release. Boeing also will slash production of its main commercial planes, including the 787 and 777.

"The aviation industry will take years to return to the levels of traffic we saw just a few months ago," Calhoun said. "We have to prepare for that."

Calhoun said the job cuts would be deeper—more than 15 percent—in the commercial airplane and services divisions, as compared with defense and space systems, where business has been more stable. The company had 160,000 employees prior to the announcement, putting the downsizing at about 16,000 jobs.

The quarterly loss of \$641 million compared to profits of \$2.1 billion in the same three-month period a year ago. Revenues fell 26.2 percent to \$16.9 billion. And total debt at the end of the quarter had swelled to \$38.9 billion, up from \$27.3 billion at the end of December. Calhoun said the belt-tightening was needed to maintain adequate liquidity at a time when revenues are depressed, adding that the company is "exploring potential government funding options" in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Shares rallied following the announcements, including Boeing's statement that it "will be able to obtain sufficient liquidity to fund its operations."

Potential US government aid

Boeing has previously called for \$60 billion in government support for the US aerospace industry. The federal CARES Act stimulus package included \$17 billion aimed at the company. Calhoun said the company would weigh potential support from the US Treasury against private sources, noting that credit markets have improved since the CARES Act was passed and as



RENTON: An employee works on the engine of a Boeing 737 MAX airplane at the company's factory on Wednesday in Renton, Washington. —AFP

the Fed moves to inject cash into the system.

"We're going to evaluate all these options," Calhoun said Wednesday in an interview with CNBC. "We need liquidity." Executives also said the company hopes to maintain its investment-grade credit rating.

Late Wednesday, S&P again downgraded the company's credit ratings one notch, citing a bigger cash outflow than previously expected. However, Boeing, which was also downgraded in December and March, is still investment grade under the S&P rubric.

Factors in the first-quarter loss included "abnormal production costs" connected to the temporary suspension of Washington state manufacturing operations due to COVID-19 and the suspension of production of the 737 MAX, which has been grounded worldwide for more than a year following two deadly crashes. Boeing said the pandemic has hit demand for new planes and services, with airlines delaying purchases of jets, slowing delivery schedules and deferring elective maintenance.

The company this year will cut production of the 787 to 10 a month from 14, and gradually reduce that to seven a month by 2022. It also will trim output of the 777 and lower its targets for the 737 MAX. —AFP

Sports

Swimming with turtles: Lockdown training makes a splash in India

Athletes are finding novel ways to stay fit

NEW DELHI: From swimming in a makeshift farm pool with turtles and fish to fencing with a dummy on a terrace, India's locked down athletes are finding novel ways to stay fit. The postponement of the 2020 Olympics by a year has given SP Likith, India's top breaststroke swimmer, extra time to make the 59.93sec qualifying time for the 100 metres.

He has been stuck at his coach's farm in Karnataka state since February and now swims in a tank already inhabited by wildlife that normally supplies the water for crops and vegetables. The 21-year-old from Bangalore, who still has to shave two seconds off his personal best to qualify, told AFP he was "lucky" to have the 20-metre long tank where coach Partha Varanashi drills 15 swimmers in all.

"The only difference (from a pool) is .. the water is not clear at all, there are fish and turtles and we don't have lanes," Likith said with a laugh. "It is not boring, it is fun. Right now our main goal is to keep our immunity high, so it's just five or six swimming sessions a week and the rest is yoga and other stuff."

Fencer Bhavani Devi has been in quarantine and training alone at home in the southern city of Chennai since returning from Italy on March 15. The 26-year-old sabre fencer trains with a

dummy on the terrace of her house.

"This is not a new idea for me, when I started fencing we used to play with sticks and do target training by placing a mask or target pad on the wall," said Devi, who in 2017 became the first Indian to win a fencing World Cup event.

Devi, who is more used to the plush facilities of leading Italian coach Nicola Zanotti in Livorno, said it was imperative to keep a positive mind through the crisis. "This period is for me to prepare myself the best with the sources available and be ready when things resume," she said.

"At the same time being at home for this long time is more special for me after many years. That gives more energy too."

India's top 400m sprinter Muhammed Anas, aiming for a second straight Olympics, admitted that the lockdown has taken a mental toll on his preparations. Anas, part of the mixed 4x400m relay team, moved to the National Institute of Sports in Patiala in February and stayed there as the number of coronavirus cases surged in India.

"For an athlete like me, who spends most time training outdoors, the lockdown does sometimes mentally drain me," said the 25-year-old, who won a silver medal at 2018 Asian Games.

But indoor training, some "light entertain-



CHENNAI: In this handout photo taken in April 2020, India's fencer Bhavani Devi trains on the roof of her home while staying in self-quarantine in Chennai. — AFP

ment" and staying in contact with his family and friends has helped overcome "the mental tension". The uncertainty over whether the Olympics will ever go ahead weighs on all the

athletes. "It does bother a bit," said Anas. "But I am more of a glass half-full person so, I am looking at the brighter side at the moment as I am getting more time to train." — AFP

Baseball's Ramirez eyes Taiwan comeback

TAIPEI: Former Major League Baseball star slugger Manny Ramirez is eyeing a comeback in Taiwan, the first place in the world to start its baseball season during the global coronavirus pandemic. "I have been itching to get back in the batter's box and be able to compete again," Ramirez, 47, told the Taiwan Times.

He added his goal was to "find a roster spot" in Taiwan's Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL). "I also miss being around teammates and team dinners post-game," added Ramirez, who was an All-Star 12 times during an 18-year Major League career and won the World Series twice with the Boston Red Sox.

Ramirez's agent Hector Zepeda posted a Twitter video yesterday of Ramirez practising in bright sunlight. "He never lost his touch he still got it. Opportunity is there for a comeback for China Professional Baseball League," Zepeda tweeted.

One of baseball's most successful big hitters, Ramirez played in Taiwan briefly in 2013 after retiring from the major leagues in 2011 as

one of only 25 players to pass 500 home runs.

The Dominican Republic native said attendances almost "quadrupled overnight" with his arrival at that time. "I know if I was given the opportunity to come in an organisation as a player-coach, it would do great things for the organisation and the league," he said.

He described his experience playing for EDA Rhinos, now known as Fubon Guardians, as "a kid at a candy store," saying the Taiwanese fans treated him like "baseball-royalty". "My fondest memory of Taiwan happens to be my first home run in a Rhinos uniform."

Taiwan has bucked the global trend for scrapped sports events after starting a new baseball season this month. Despite its close proximity and economic links with China it has managed to keep a lid on the COVID-19 outbreak with 429 confirmed cases and six deaths. The four league teams are playing to empty stadiums in games broadcast live locally — with one team placing robotic mannequins and cardboard cut-outs of fans dressed in home colours and caps in stands. —AFP

French rugby faces end of season

PARIS: The French rugby season is likely to be called off today with the country's latest coronavirus restrictions limiting the sport's ever decreasing wriggle room. On Wednesday, the presidents of France's 30 professional clubs met via video conference to discuss the next stage of a domestic season which has been on ice since mid-March.

The National Rugby League (LNR) wants the season to be declared finished. That now seems likely to be endorsed on Thursday during a meeting between the league, the French Rugby Federation (FFR) and the Ministry of Sports.

Clubs do not want behind closed doors matches and are against playing the final stages in September. However, the FFR, LNR and clubs have sent a letter to French President Emmanuel Macron to alert him of their uncertain future.

French rugby's slim hopes of completing the season were virtually doomed on Tuesday when Prime Minister Edouard Philippe told the National Assembly: "No large sports gathering, or any gathering, of 5,000 people or more, needing the permission of the local police and arrange-

ments made a long time in advance, will be allowed before September."

Many of those involved had already told AFP that rather than holding playoffs behind closed doors with disorganised squads at the end of a truncated season, the league and the clubs were leaning towards ending the season.

That would leave the question of whether Bordeaux-Begles, eight points clear in the French Top 14, would be awarded the title, and whether they would be prepared to accept it, with nine matches and the playoffs left.

"Having only played 17 rounds, we won't be asking for anything," the club's president Laurent Marti told French radio a few weeks ago. "We won't ask for it," he said. "And if it's offered to us, we'll think about whether to accept it or not. It's not a sure thing." If the season is abandoned, the issue of promotion and relegation would be decided by a league committee at a later date. Already, the 2020-2021 season is looking complicated for Top 14 clubs.

"If we decide to embark on the new season, we need to be able to do so with a certain number of guarantees, particularly in terms of the staging of matches and finance," Thomas Lombard, general manager of Paris-based Stade Francais, told AFP. "The clubs are going to be in survival mode for the next four months, as we haven't had any income since March," Lombard said. "There are certainly government aid measures, but we still have costs to meet, starting with the salaries of players and administrative staff." — AFP

Sports

Ripped not RIP'd: Myanmar's former 'Mr Burma' still pumping iron at 91

Barrel-chested nonagenarian's career has spanned 70 years

YANGON: Flexing his oiled, bulging biceps and pecs, 91-year-old one-time bodybuilding champion Sein Maung admires himself in the mirror before starting to pump iron in his Myanmar gym. The barrel-chested nonagenarian's career has spanned some 70 years, both pre-dating and outlasting the country's half-century of junta rule.

But he describes the late 1950s as his heyday, when he bagged a medal at the 1958 Burmese "Mr Olympic" contest before being crowned "Mr Burma" a year later.

"All of my brothers died in their 70s, but I'm still here," he tells AFP proudly, putting his hearty longevity down to a disciplined lifestyle based around religion, diet and exercise. Buddhist prayers begin each workout before he greases up and starts gruelling sets of chest presses, deadlifts and bicep curls.

Myanmar has a robust bodybuilding culture, and competitions held at malls often draw enthusiastic crowds to cheer on sculpted men in speedos — an incongruous sight in the socially conservative country.

Before he even knew it was a bona fide sport, Sein Maung says as a teenager he would hulk heavy blocks of wood around his small village in rural Ayeyarwaddy region.

A bodybuilding show he saw as a young soldier in 1950 proved to be an epiphany, and there has been no looking back. With his career skyrocketing in the 1960s, he even starred in two movies and became bodybuilding coach for Miss Burma beauty pageant contestants.

Meanwhile in 1962 — the same year the military took over in a coup — he set up a gym in commercial hub Yangon that still runs today. Once there used to be around 200 members, he says somewhat wistfully, but now only a handful remain, mostly women also in their later years.

He admits his fiery temperament might be to blame for his fitness centre's dwindling popularity. "I get so angry and tell people to get out if they don't take bodybuilding seriously. I can't control my temper."

Like most in the city, the gym currently lies shuttered due to coronavirus fears. Yet Sein Maung says he is continuing with his prayers, protein-based diet and strict fitness regime at home to keep his immune system as strong as possible.

He shrugs off concerns about the virus. "I know it's mostly elderly people who are dying. But I'm not worried just because I'm in my 90s. I'm not afraid to die." — AFP



YANGON: This photo taken on February 7, 2020 shows 91-year-old bodybuilder Sein Maung working out with weights at his gym, which has since been closed due to fears about the spread of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, in Yangon. — AFP

UK Athletics hands over Salazar file to British anti-doping agency

LONDON: UK Athletics said Wednesday it had at last handed over an internal report into its relationship with banned American coach Alberto Salazar during the time he worked with track star Mo Farah to Britain's national anti-doping agency.

The report dates back to 2015 and was prompted by a BBC documentary on Salazar. The disgraced coach is currently serving a four-year ban imposed by the United States Anti-Doping Agency in October for offences that include trafficking in testosterone, tampering with the doping control process and administering illicit infusions of the fat-burning substance L-carnitine.

Salazar, who denies wrongdoing, has appealed against the ban to the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Just over a month ago, an independent review of both the 2015 report and another undertaken two years later, was published.

But United Kingdom Anti-Doping executive chief Nicole Sapstead demanded

to see the original report in full after UK Athletics merely provided an edited summary. UK Athletics responded by saying it was "wholly wrong and inaccurate" to suggest they were "being obstructive in this matter," with chief executive Joanna Coates saying earlier this month the report would go to UKAD just as soon as all confidentiality procedures had been completed.

UK Athletics confirmed Wednesday the report had been sent over, a statement saying: "UKA can confirm that the 2015 report has been provided to UKAD. "UKA remains fully committed to protecting the integrity of the sport and the pursuit of clean athletics and we will continue to assist UKAD with any further queries."

Four-time Olympic gold medallist Farah, twice champion at both the 5,000 and 10,000 metres, worked with Salazar from 2011-2017. The British distance great, who has never failed a drugs test, is not accused of any wrongdoing. — AFP

Mitchell gets Australia contract, Khawaja axed

SYDNEY: All-rounder Mitchell Marsh returned to Cricket Australia's list of 20 nationally contracted players yesterday, but there was no room for his brother Shaun or struggling batsman Usman Khawaja.

The older Marsh sibling and Khawaja were among six players axed from a group that selectors loaded with limited-overs talent to reflect Australia's upcoming schedule, particularly the Twenty20 World Cup scheduled for October-November.

"With many of the squad crossing into all three formats it gives us the benefit of being able to add in specialists depending on the opposition and the conditions," chief selector Trevor Hohns said in a statement.

"The depth of this squad and the success of the past 12 months gives us that solid base." Others dropped from the list — which forms the core of Australia's international squads — were Peter Handscomb, Marcus Stoinis, Nathan Coulter-Nile and Marcus Harris.

"As is always the case there are unlucky omissions but, however, because you are not

on the list does not mean you cannot be selected to represent Australia," Hohns said. Mitchell Marsh endured his own period in the wilderness when he was not offered a contract last year but Hohns said his form showed "he has a lot of international cricket ahead of him as a batting all-rounder".

Prolific middle-order batsman Marnus Labuschagne was, as expected, among the new faces, along with Joe Burns, Ashton Agar, Kane Richardson and Matthew Wade. "Marnus's rise has been meteoric and well documented," Hohns said.

"Joe has been a good Test match player, Ashton Agar's form in T20 internationals has been exceptional, while Kane Richardson has been outstanding in the T20 and one-day games." Uncertainty hangs over the cricket calendar and the Twenty20 World Cup because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Australia's tour to England for three one-dayers and three Twenty20 matches in July is in jeopardy after the England and Wales Cricket Board delayed the start of their season until at least July 1.

Australia contracted players: Ashton Agar, Joe Burns, Alex Carey, Pat Cummins, Aaron Finch, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Glenn Maxwell, Tim Paine, James Pattinson, Jhye Richardson, Kane Richardson, Steven Smith, Mitchell Starc, Matthew Wade, David Warner, Adam Zampa. — AFP

Sports

League-by-league guide to European football's coronavirus shutdown

PARIS: Football leagues across Europe have been suspended since March due to the coronavirus pandemic which has claimed over 130,000 lives throughout the continent. Lockdown restrictions are in effect worldwide although some countries are cautiously beginning to ease stay-at-home orders. AFP Sport looks at what we know about the plans for Europe's top leagues:

ENGLAND

Premier League chiefs are targeting a return in June and several clubs have reopened their training grounds this week as they work on "Project Restart". The English top flight is understood to be aiming to run a huge testing operation to keep footballers safe, with reports of 26,000 tests being lined up for players and staff.

Teams could reportedly return to full training mid-May and resume matches on June 8, with the plans to be discussed at a meeting of stakeholders on Friday. The clubs remain committed to ending the 2019-20 campaign and there are compelling financial and legal reasons to play the remaining 92 games. A failure to finish the season is forecast to cost Premier League clubs an estimated £1 billion (\$1.2 billion).

Matches would almost certainly be played behind closed doors and clubs have reportedly been told that only approved stadiums could be used, with higher health certification than normal. However, the Professional Footballers' Association have raised the issue of players not wanting to be put at risk by returning too soon.

SPAIN

La Liga players will be able to restart basic training from May 4, based on the Spanish government's plans announced Tuesday to transition out of a strict virus lockdown. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said the decision was the first move in lifting lockdown measures which will be done in four stages across two months.

Braithwaite: I deserve to be at Barca

MADRID: Martin Braithwaite was Barcelona's emergency signing in February, a quick-fix to replace the injured Ousmane Dembele, but for him the move goes back 10 years to a broken leg and a notebook. In his first meeting with the club's president Josep Maria Bartomeu and technical secretary Eric Abidal, Braithwaite was told one of the main reasons Barca were buying him was his mentality.

"I felt like they really knew me," Braithwaite says in an interview with AFP. "They knew how strong I am mentally and they said that was one of the things that made them go for me. They thought I was up for the test."

Only in later stages of the process will full training sessions be able to take place. League president Javier Tebas is hopeful the league can begin again in mid-June. He has said "it is not an option" to cancel the season given the economic fallout, estimating it would cost clubs around a billion euros. "I do not understand why there would more danger in playing football behind closed doors, with all precautionary measures" than any other line of work, Tebas said. "In Spain, football is an important economic driver that we need to reactivate like many others. We continue to focus on this reactivation, in a responsible manner and adhering to health recommendations, as soon as possible."

ITALY

Italy's sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora has warned Serie A could be called off, with the league facing "an increasingly narrow path" for its resumption. The government has allowed individual athletes to resume training next week but team sports, including football, must wait until at least May 18. The move was slammed by Italy's footballers' union "as discriminatory and even illogical". All 20 top-flight clubs have voted unanimously to complete the league season, but the final decision rests with the government. An emergency meeting of the clubs will be held on Friday. Spadafora suggested "the majority could ask us to suspend this season and prepare for the next championship as best possible".

Italian football chiefs have already pushed back the end of the Serie A season from June 30 to August 2. The goal of a return to competition in early June has become impracticable, shifting the date towards June 10-14. Another solution being touted would be a play-off to allocate the Scudetto and qualifying places for European competition and determine relegation.

GERMANY

The Bundesliga could resume by "the middle

The toughness they saw owes much to when Braithwaite was 18 and playing for Esbjerg FB in Denmark. A broken leg prompted him to transform his attitude and start writing objectives down in a notebook.

"I was already a professional footballer but I wasn't respecting the job and I wasn't respecting the boy that had a dream to be here," Braithwaite says. "I took it for granted."

A year later, Braithwaite was in a hotel after joining Toulouse when he took out his notebook again. "I came to a page of some objectives, maybe three or four years earlier, and I saw I had written Toulouse," Braithwaite says. "When I saw that, I thought, 'Wow, the power of the mind is really strong'."

"And when I was 27 or 28, I wrote I would play for one of the biggest clubs in the world. Now I'm here, where I said I would be 10 years ago." Braithwaite draws upon his childhood too, when a hip condition called Legg-Calve-Perthes left him in a wheelchair between the age of five and seven. — AFP



GELSENKIRCHEN: The team of German Bundesliga club FC Schalke 04 attends a training session at the club's training grounds in Gelsenkirchen, western Germany yesterday amid the new coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

or end of May" according to the country's sports ministers, although it still requires the green light from Angela Merkel's government. Chancellor Merkel will meet state leaders in Berlin yesterday, when it is hoped the league will be granted permission to resume play from May 16.

Clubs returned to training at the start of the month while adhering to social distancing guidelines and games would be played behind closed doors, with large-scale public events banned in Germany until August 31. Borussia Dortmund chief executive Hans-Joachim Watzke warned last weekend that "the entire Bundesliga will go down" unless the league restarts. Germany's top clubs are desperate for the league season to be completed by June 30 in order to claim an instalment of television money worth 300 million euros (\$325 million). A primary sticking point is the testing of players, which critics claim will be an extra burden on Germany's health system.

FRANCE

The Ligue 1 season appears to be over after French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said professional football cannot resume until September. The French league will meet today "to analyse the sporting and economic consequences" of the government announcement.

Assuming no more matches take place, the league must decide how to end the season. It is understood that France will not follow the lead of the Netherlands, who decided to void their season with no champion, relegation or promotion. Final placings could be attributed based on the standings as they are, or using an average of points per game. Sports daily L'Equipe calculates that the top two divisions could now miss out on 243 million euros (\$264 million) from broadcasters Canal Plus and beIN Sports, plus 35 million euros for international rights. That is on top of lost gate receipts and sponsorship. — AFP

Maradona pleads for 'Hand of God' to end pandemic

BUENOS AIRES: Argentine football legend Diego Maradona has asked the "Hand of God" to deliver the world from the coronavirus pandemic and allow normal life to resume.

The World Cup winner referred to his hand-assisted goal in the 1986 World Cup after Argentine football chiefs voted to end the current season as well as suspend relegation, saving Maradona-managed bottom club Gimnasia from the drop.

"Today this happened to us and many people say it is a new Hand of God," said Maradona, alluding to his infamous goal

against England. "But today I'm asking for that hand to end this pandemic so people can go back to living their lives, healthy and happy." Then-Argentine captain Maradona responded to the controversy over his goal at the World Cup in Mexico by saying "it was the Hand of God!"

Argentina went on to beat England 2-1 in the quarter-final. On being thrown a lifeline by the suspension of the season, he told Argentine daily Clarin: "It's not the ending we had wanted, we were convinced we could save ourselves on the pitch."

Argentina has been in lockdown since March 20 against the coronavirus, which by early Wednesday had infected 4,114 people with 207 deaths. The 59-year-old Maradona, appointed to manage struggling Gimnasia in September, said clubs in Argentina are facing years of financial difficulty. "Hopefully it is understood that we have to face what's coming together, for the good of football. — AFP

Sport Times

www.kuwaittimes.net

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2020

CHENNAI: In this handout photo taken in April 2020, India's fencer Bhavani Devi trains on the roof of her home while staying in self-quarantine in Chennai. — AFP



Lockdown training makes a splash in India

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