



9 Berkshire reports \$50bn loss, sells stakes in all US airlines



14 Iraqis turn to sketches and songs to curb virus

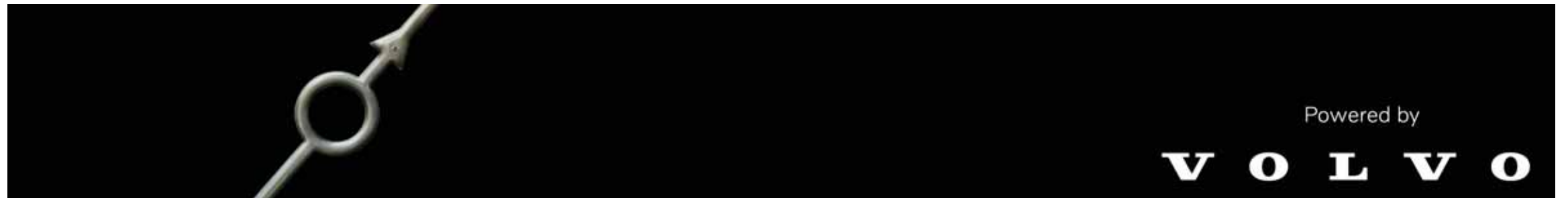


15 Hollywood artist tutors Arabic-speaking kids



Ramadan KAREEM

Imsak	03:27
Fajr	03:37
Dhuhr	11:45
Asr	15:21
Maghrib	18:26
Isha	19:50



Nursing chief says Filipina nurse dies of coronavirus

MoH accused of negligence • Up to 90 nurses allegedly infected



KUWAIT: Members of a Chinese medical team meet Kuwaiti officials. — KUNA

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Head of Kuwait Nursing Association Bandar Al-Enezi said yesterday that a Filipina nurse died of coronavirus and accused the health ministry of negligence to save her life. He also said that as many as 90 nurses have been infected with the disease. Meanwhile, the National Assembly's health and labor committee is scheduled to hold a meeting this week with health ministry officials to discuss a report submitted by a Chinese medical team on the coronavirus situation, the committee's rapporteur MP Saadoun Hammad said.

"It is unfortunate that members of the nursing staff die in this brutal way" Enezi tweeted yesterday morning. He said he has asked the health ministry undersecretary to launch a comprehensive investigation into all sides responsible for this potential negligence, and called for sacking those proven responsible or sending them to court.

The official charged that there had been negligence towards the deceased by her seniors, saying that she was asked to stay at the nurses' residence for three days, although she was known to have contracted the disease. He said the preventive health department, head of Sabah medical area nursing and the area's ambulance service knew about her condition, but she still stayed for three days at the nurses' residence.

Enezi said that they told her "when you have severe symptoms, call the ambulance", but her condition deteriorated and her pulse stopped. Three of her colleagues tried to save her life; she was then taken to

hospital, where she died. He said that one of three nurses who helped her has been admitted to the intensive care unit after she was confirmed to have contracted the disease, while the other two were asked to isolate themselves. Enezi also said in press statements that as many as 90 nurses have contracted the disease and called for additional measures to protect those on the frontline.

Meanwhile, MP Mohammad Hayef criticized a ministry decision to send a number of coronavirus patients to various hospitals apparently because Jaber Hospital is full. The lawmaker said that although the patients are given private rooms, there is a high risk that they may spread the disease to other patients.

MP Hammad said the Assembly's health panel meeting will include discussions with the health minister and senior health officials about the latest developments in fighting the coronavirus. He said the meeting will discuss a report prepared by a Chinese medical team in the country to assess the situation and make recommendations. Hammad said the committee will also discuss why there has been a rise in the number of infections among health personnel, and the ministry should benefit from Chinese expertise in this respect.

The Assembly's legal and legislative committee was scheduled to discuss later yesterday amendments to the labor law in the private sector to increase penalties against employers who recruit expat workers and fail to provide them promised jobs. The amendments also propose to penalize employers who provide jobs to workers not under their sponsorship.

News in brief

Virus hits vaccination

AMMAN: The coronavirus pandemic could jeopardize vaccination campaigns in the Middle East and North Africa, UNICEF warned yesterday, saying millions of children could miss out on polio and measles immunizations. The UN agency warned that some vaccination campaigns had been suspended as health workers were diverted to fighting COVID-19. "As a result, one in five children or 10 million children under the age of five risk missing their polio vaccination. Nearly 4.5 million children under the age of 15 risk missing their measles vaccination," it said in a statement. — AFP

Dammam area isolated

CAIRO: Saudi Arabia isolated an industrial area of the eastern city of Dammam yesterday, preventing entry and exit until further notice to curb the spread of the new coronavirus, state news agency SPA said on Saturday. Freight shipments will be able to come and go from the area, Dammam Second Industrial City, SPA said, citing an interior ministry official. The decision allows vital factories to operate at one third capacity, SPA added. — Reuters

UAE malls, diners reopen

DUBAI: Malls in Abu Dhabi began reopening to a restricted number of customers as the UAE eases lockdown measures imposed more than a month ago to combat the novel coronavirus. Three Abu Dhabi malls reopened on Saturday at 30 percent customer capacity after adopting safety measures, including installing thermal inspection devices, the government media office tweeted. Sharjah emirate's media office said malls, salons and dine-in restaurants could resume operations yesterday. — Reuters

Cremations traumatize Philippines

MANILA: Families of coronavirus victims in the Philippines are being denied traditional death rites in favor of hurried, impersonal cremations, with virus restrictions often meaning they are forbidden a last look at their loved ones. It is a painful and disorienting process for both the families and crematory workers that has upended the Philippines' intimate rituals of laying the dead to rest. Burial is the norm in the Catholic-majority nation, and it usually follows a days-long display of the embalmed body at home or in a chapel.

But due to the pandemic authorities are encouraging rapid cremations -

though quick burials are still allowed - of suspected or confirmed COVID-19 deaths. Wakes are barred in these cases and hospitals must seal remains in plastic and send them directly to crematories or funeral homes. Before the virus struck, families opting for cremation were able to have one last look at their loved one before the body was consigned to the flames.

Now workers have to gently explain the regulations denying even that to distraught relatives. "We tell them we can't do it because it's dangerous. We could all get infected," 54-year-old worker Romeo Uson, sweat-soaked in a protective suit at a Manila crematorium, told AFP. "It's also painful for us," he added. "We can't let the families mourn the dead like before."

His facility has been conducting six to seven cremations a day, double the usual number, since contagion from the

Continued on Page 16



MANILA: Personnel in protective suits prepare to move a body inside the crematory chambers at a crematorium facility on April 29, 2020. — AFP

Friends, foes see opening in aiding US

WASHINGTON: The United States has long hailed its aid overseas as a sign of good intentions, but friends and foes alike are seeing opportunities of their own by helping the global power ravaged by the coronavirus. Turkey, looking to end a rough spell with its NATO ally, and Egypt, whose leader counts on support from President Donald Trump, both sent military jets full of supplies in the past two weeks, while Taiwan, reliant on Washington for its defense and praised for its effective coronavirus response, has sent millions of masks.

More controversially, China and Russia - considered top global rivals by Washington - have both sent medical goods to the United States, whose COVID-19 death toll is by far the highest in the world at more than 66,000. Nicholas Cull, a professor at the University of Southern California who studies international reputation, said that gifts were often more about donors' domestic audiences as

leaders try to show that they are "winning the respect and admiration of the world".

Cull said the most successful gifts come when a nation has no obvious political motivation and appears to be acting out of emotional attachment to another country. He pointed to the rousing reception in Italy for doctors sent by Albania, one of the poorest nations in Europe. By contrast, China's aid has been met by suspicion that Beijing is trying to assert itself or obscure the origins of the respiratory sickness, which was first discovered in the metropolis of Wuhan.

Recent history is full of disaster-hit nations whose prideful governments have refused help, but the United States has said it welcomes international cooperation against the virus. "We appreciate the generosity and support from around the world," a State Department spokesperson said. Other assistance has included testing kits from the United Arab Emirates and dispatches of medical teams from US allies, notably Poland.

The US government has not directly taken aid from China, with Trump eager to blame Beijing over the pandemic amid criticism around his own performance. But China has channeled assistance to US states or through private donations. Jack Ma, China's richest person, in March announced a

Continued on Page 16

Turkey contact tracers race to contain virus

ANKARA/ISTANBUL: Two medics in protective suits jumped out of a car in a deserted street in central Ankara and hurried inside a building - one carrying medical equipment and the other, paperwork. Some 15 minutes later, they sped off to their next appointment, one of nearly 6,000 teams deployed across Turkey to try to stem the coronavirus pandemic by tracking down the contacts of those found to have become infected.

After recording some of the fastest growth in COVID-19 infections in the world, health officials say the outbreak in Turkey has hit a plateau around six weeks after the first case was confirmed. The death toll of 3,336 is lower than 12 other countries. The daily death toll has been on a downward trajectory for more than 10 days, with 78 deaths confirmed in the past 24 hours, according to health ministry data on Saturday.

Continued on Page 16

Local

Hundreds of workers at Zour project fear for their lives amid COVID-19 outbreak

No sufficient precautions, social distancing not observed

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: A majority of the hundreds of Filipino workers at a government project in Zour want to go back home. They fear for their lives, as they allege a continuing increase of coronavirus cases in their camp daily. "There are now about 40 workers already COVID-19 positive (of various nationalities); there is one positive among us Filipinos. Just last week, a close friend of mine died of a heart attack, fearing for his life too. We are all thinking what if the coronavirus reaches our building - we are doomed. And since this is a compound, maybe it's just a matter of time we will all be infected with the virus," a Filipino told Kuwait Times via Facebook Messenger. There has been no confirmation from the authorities on the number of infected workers at the camp.

"We tried to negotiate with the company to give us more protection. With due fairness, they are spraying the whole compound every morning, but we are not convinced. We are locked down since April 27. Initially, they told us to go back to work from May 3, but they extended the lockdown until May 10," the worker said, whose video about conditions at the camp made the rounds on social media over the weekend. He admitted to have been visited recently by doctors and nurses from the health ministry, and some of his coworkers who are allegedly coronavirus-positive have been taken out of the camp to the hospital.

"We are really concerned for our lives here. We want to live, we want to go back to our families; we want to work, but we do not want to die here. They need to take more necessary precautions so that we

can be protected," he said. He added that the company is not properly observing social distancing, especially during lunch and dinner times. "Since we are in a camp, we are still eating together without observing social distancing - we have families and we all want to go back home safely, and we hope proper precautions will be observed for us here," he said.

The company being run by Koreans is in charge of the new government LNG project in Zour. There are about 2,000 Filipinos working in the project, mostly as pipefitters, welders, foremen and others. There are several thousands of other workers as well from var-

“

We do not want to die here

”

ious nationalities, mainly Indians, Nepalese and Chinese. Last week, a group of Indian workers reportedly staged a sit-in protest, urging the management to take stricter measures to protect workers.

"We do not want to die here, so we urge our company to take more measures so that we will be safe until our departure from the camp," the Filipino worker said. The viral video clip of the workers in Zour also caught the attention of the Philippine Em-



KUWAIT: The compound housing workers for the new government LNG project in Zour.

bassy in Kuwait. "We have noted their complaints and are coordinating with authorities. We are closely monitoring their situation," said Philippine Embassy Charge d'Affaires Charleson Hermosura when asked about the workers. Kuwait Times also tried to reach the management of the Korean company, but to no avail.

A source from the camp said they were hired from the Philippines on a special working visa to help the government complete the new oil refinery project in Zour. Some of them have already completed their six-

month and one year contracts. "Half of us Filipino workers, maybe around 1,000, have already completed our six-month contracts and have tickets to go back home. We want to go home, but there are others who still want to stay. But since the lockdown, we have no choice - we have to wait until commercial flights resume. They don't want to spend extra money on new flights, because they said they already purchased our plane tickets, and if they buy new tickets, the airfare will be triple the price. We had regular tickets on Kuwait Airways," he explained.

Pandemic Diaries

The deaths



By Jamie Etheridge

etheridge@kuwaittimes.com

As of yesterday morning, Kuwait has recorded 33 deaths from the coronavirus. The number is low, less than 1 percent of active cases. In some ways, this is great news for all of us here, because it means the government's efforts to provide care for those who get sick is working.

At the same time, each of those 33 people who died left behind family and friends. They were grandmothers and grandfathers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, moms and dads. They were individual people with lives filled with relationships, family and work. They were people we might share a meal with or talk to in a coffee shop. They had hopes and dreams and plans for the future.

Globally, there have now been 243,674 deaths worldwide attributed to the coronavirus (though some reports suggest this figure severely undercounts likely deaths, since many countries are not widely testing their populations and deaths at home, for instance, often aren't tested).

The loss of each human being carries with it a follow-on series of losses. Society loses that person, their creativity and contribution, their ideas and kindnesses, their work and whatever good they might have contributed to the world. And also the ripples that person may have sent out - children they might have had, ideas they may have developed. Yes, if there were negatives, we lose those too, and some may see that as balance.

But balance matters little to those left behind to grieve the loss of their loved ones. To them, each person in the 'death count' is not a number, a faceless victim, but someone who loved and was loved, someone who mattered.

In the newspaper business, we deal with death counts on a daily basis. We report the death toll from bombings and wars, from car accidents and natural disasters. We have no choice but to report the death counts as an integral part of the story. Rarely do we get the opportunity or the option to tell the individual stories of those who died.

In Kuwait, the ministry of health reports the death counts but is not sharing the names of victims in order to protect the privacy of the deceased and their families. This is as it should be. But death tolls are a daily part of the news cycle, and we report them because that is what we do. But behind each number, each new death count, is a person with a name, a face, a family. As the numbers climb, we all need to remember this.

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has recorded 4,619 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as of Saturday, in addition to 33 deaths. With the exception of 69 cases in intensive care, all infected cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while hundreds have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 1,776 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, while there are 2,810 people receiving treatment and 3,288 quarantined as of yesterday. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested thousands of people. Meanwhile, Kuwait requires all expatriates who arrived from travel on March 1 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center to test people for possible infection.

Curfew

Kuwait enforced a country-wide curfew from 5:00 pm to 6:00 am, which was later extended to start from 4:00 pm until 8:00 am during Ramadan, while allowing restaurants and food stores to make home deliveries from 5:00 pm until 1:00 am. The government also locked down Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh in a bid to contain the spread of the virus and enable health workers to test inhabitants. Earlier, the government decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The government also allowed supermarkets, restaurants and shops to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are lines, the distance must be at least one meter between people. The Ministry of Commerce launched a website (www.moci.shop) to enable people to book appointments to shop at co-operative societies in their areas. The Public Authority for Industry also announced that companies can apply to evacuate their workers from Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula. To do so, they must fill a 'workers evacuation form' available on www.pai.gov.kw, and send the form via email to: Jasiri@moh.gov.kw.

Precautions

Kuwait halted all commercial flights until further notice, and has sent special flights to repatriate Kuwaitis back home from countries affected with the virus' spread. All arrivals to Kuwait from all countries are to be placed under compulsory institutional quarantine for 14 days, during which the person is monitored, and prescribed health procedures are applied, the health ministry said. Meanwhile, the Cabinet announced on April 9 the operation of all airline flights for expats who are wishing to return back to their countries. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to May 28, with work resuming on May 31, while entities providing vital services will remain open. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended classes for March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs); first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29, before eventually suspending schools until August for grade 12 and October for other stages. State departments have been on high alert to take precautions against the potential spread of the virus. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has taken measures to make sure that facial masks, hand sanitizers and other goods remain accessible to the public.

Kuwait suspended issuing entry permits and visas unless those issued through diplomatic missions. The Interior Ministry issued an amnesty allowing residency violators to leave the country between April 1 and April 30 without paying any fines or airfare with a chance to return to Kuwait later. The amnesty was issued in view of the circumstances the country is currently going through and as part of the precautionary measures taken to fight the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). During the amnesty period, individuals desiring to procure valid residencies in Kuwait and were willing to pay the fines without being subjected to investigations were allowed to pay the fines and legalize their status if they meet the required conditions.

Hotlines

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

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

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

Medicine delivery

Kuwait's Ministry of Health (MOH) launched a new medicine delivery service for people in Kuwait, which they can use to order medications to be delivered during curfew hours. The medications will be delivered within 72 hours after the order is submitted. To place an order, patients should send a WhatsApp to the numbers for the hospitals and medical centers as listed below. The patient should include their name, Civil ID number, hospital or clinic file number, mobile phone number and the medicine needed to the following numbers:

- Amiri Hospital: 50880699
- Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital: 50880755
- Farwaniya Hospital: 50880852
- Adan Hospital: 50880908
- Jahra Hospital: 50881066
- Sabah Hospital: 97632660
- Jaber Hospital: 96992079
- Ibn Sina Hospital: 99613948
- Chest Hospital: 99258749
- Razi Hospital: 97633487
- Kuwait Cancer Control Center: 96735242
- Psychiatric Hospital: 97350113
- Physiotherapy Hospital: 99824037
- Maternity Hospital: 98559531
- As'ad Al-Hamad Dermatology Center: 98514508
- Zain Hospital: 97552031
- NBK Hospital: 96931761
- Al-Rashed Allergy Hospital: 94162470
- Infectious Diseases Hospital: 96989164
- Palliative Care Hospital: 94024786
- Sabah Al-Ahmad Urology Center: 90952469
- KFH Addiction Treatment Center: 94169363

Meanwhile, all licensed pharmacies in Kuwait delivering medicine are allowed to continue their services 24 hours a day. The Ministry of Health is also asking doctors and nurses affiliated with the private medical sector to volunteer in order to contribute to the fight against the virus. Volunteering is available through the link: <http://volunteering.q8-health.com>. The ministry had closed all private clinics and medical centers effective March 22, 2020 until further notice.

Mental health assistance

The Kuwait Psychological Association (KPA) is providing consultation through the phone for people suffering from the psychological impacts of coronavirus. Different doctors are working on the hotline in different timings as follows:

- **Dr Rashed Al-Sahh:** on Monday and Wednesday 10:00 am - 1:00 pm. Call 9797-6168.
 - **Dr Fahad Al-Tasha:** daily from 8:00 pm - 12:00 am. Call 9904-8258.
 - **Dr Othman Al-Asfour:** daily 5:00 pm - 8:00 pm. Call 9938-5350.
 - **Dr Mohammed Al-Khalidi (head of this team):** daily 9:00 am - 12:00 pm. Call 9903-6470.
 - **Dr Ahmad Al-Khalidi:** daily 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 9910-7965.
 - **Dr Muneera Al-Qattan:** Monday and Wednesday 9:00 am - 1:00 pm. Call 9953-3108.
 - **Dr Zainab Al-Saffar:** Sunday and Thursday 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 9954-9908.
 - **Dr Sameera Al-Kandari:** Tuesday 9:00 pm - 12:00 am. Call 6770-9434.
 - **Dr Kawthar Al-Yaqout:** Monday and Wednesday 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Call 5521-0088.
- For information and other concerns, call 9401-4283.

In my view

Forgiveness: A way of life



By Abdellatif Sharaa

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Saturday afternoon, just before the curfew came into effect, a policeman stopped a motorist over a traffic violation. They then started to exchange words that no longer had anything to do with the violation, and almost turned into a heated confrontation if it was not for the wisdom of the policeman, who calmed down and asked the man to do so too, and apologized for any words that he did not like or were inappropriate. The driver obliged, as the policeman was enforcing the law, and things ended with a handshake. Mind you, a few cars were stuck at the exit until the dispute was over. What a nice ending, especially during this holy month of Ramadan.

It is among the most noble acts to forgive, as Almighty Allah and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) ordered us to do. Forgiveness is done when the person is able, and should overlook the mistakes of others, and even to look for excuses for them, and look for what is good in them instead of focusing on their mistakes.

Life is short and time is passing fast, so there is no need for us to have grudges. Let us have respect and love for each other so that we can have peace of mind. It is for sure that if an offense is answered with another, offenses will not end at all; rather, mutual respect confirms that mistakes are forgivable regardless of what they may be.

Forgiveness is needed by every individual, so that disputes and differences among them can be wiped out. Forgiveness is when a person forgives those who deserve punishment, although they can carry the punishment out, and we must not treat the offensive person with a similar offense.

Forgiveness has many forms, the greatest of which is the forgiveness Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) gave to his people as in a hadith that was narrated in Al-Bukhari about the condition of the prophet when he was attacked and blood trickled down his face. He said: "O Allah! Forgive my nation, for they have no knowledge."

One may wonder - how can I be forgiving? This is actually in the individual's wish to be happy, and for that he should forgive bad deeds and remember the good ones, and should ignore mistakes of others while seeking the acceptance of Allah. Forgiveness has great effects on the individual and society, and this will create a strong and prosperous society that is free of grudges, which cause problems.

Final word: "Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace." -Jonathan Lockwood Huie

Local

Inside isolation areas: Residents speak of growing hardship under lockdown



KUWAIT: A long queue outside the health clinic in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh. — Photos by Reem Al-Gharabally



An overcrowded makeshift market in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh.

By Reem Al-Gharabally

KUWAIT: Kuwait isolated Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula nearly a month ago. The two densely-populated areas predominantly inhabited by low income, foreign workers are now barricaded behind barbwire and checkpoints. No one is allowed to leave the area without a permit. Originally announced as a two-week isolation, it has now been extended "until further notice."

Authorities say the effort aims to curb the spread of COVID-19 after clusters were discovered there. Despite the isolation, Kuwait's COVID-19 numbers have continued to spike, along with the growing desperation of Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula residents.

A recent visit to Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh exposed the lack of safety measures: no social distancing and long queues outside the health clinic, pharmacies and supermarkets. The informal outdoor market was open and crowded. Unemployed men sit around in groups outside their buildings. With many people living in dormitory accommodation, social distancing is impossible. The lockdown has forced people to remain in overcrowded conditions for longer periods.

Residents of Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula speak of growing hardship. Unable to work, many struggle to afford basic necessities, food, rent, sending money back home or paying off loans. Savings have quickly depleted as the lockdown is extended. "We can't survive like this!" says Hussein, a 33-year long-term resident of Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh. "It has been two weeks. Then it will be a month. But after that, what? We are helpless."

Forgotten corner

Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, with a population of more than 300,000, has been the forgotten corner of Kuwait for decades. Dilapidated buildings, damaged roads and an overburdened sewage system originally built for a population a third of its current size characterize the area. The authorities are aware of these problems and have come under scrutiny by local media.

Under lockdown, donation food trucks are sent to the area to provide a lifeline for residents. Long queues to receive donations make social distancing impossible. Signs of social unrest are already showing. In Mahboula, a food truck was mobbed last week causing authorities to re-think food distribution strategies.

"There needs to be consistent communication in languages that migrants understand to avoid unnecessary panic, as well as organized provision of food and basics. According to people we've spoken to in these neighborhoods, this isn't happening yet," says a spokesperson for Migrant Rights, a GCC-based advocacy organization.

For the thousands of daily wage migrants in Kuwait, there has been no support. The only way out is the recently announced government amnesty to allow workers who have overstayed their visas to leave the country with a plane ticket provided and visa violation fines waived. Those with valid visas but no work are not included in the amnesty.

Still thousands rushed to accept the amnesty terms. During a recent visit to Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh, men wheeled heavy suitcases down the main street, waiting for buses to take them to the amnesty center. (The last day for the amnesty was April 30). Once they reach the facility, some reportedly got stranded because the facility was struggling to deal with the numbers of people turning up. Even though the amnesty offered a way out, thousands are returning to their countries with crushed dreams and financial debt.

Essential services

Expatriates who still have a job, continue to provide essential services to Kuwait during the lockdown. Kuwait's street cleaners, couriers, supermarket workers, nurses, lab technicians, doctors, pharmacists, delivery drivers, journalists, teachers, accountants, dentists and other professionals and laborers continue to work.

The large illegal populations have fuelled a debate among the citizenry regarding visa traders, the demographic imbalance (there are more than 3 million expats



Overflowing sewage in Hasawi.

and 1.5 million Kuwaitis in the country). Some leading politicians and public figures have used the high number of infections amongst guest workers to push anti-expatriate agendas and make xenophobic comments.

"These residents in overcrowded accommodation are victims of the illegal practices of their employers. How can we blame them for that? It's their employers who need to face charges and accept the costs of providing decent accommodation before they get infected," argued human rights lawyer Atyab Alshatti.

COVID-19 did not create the conditions in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, it is just exacerbating the existing problems. Is prolonging the economic hardship caused by the mass detention of the impoverished communities in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula actually helping to curb the pandemic here, or is just causing a humanitarian crisis on a large scale? "On television it seems everything is perfect. It is not," explains Alshatti. "The government has to provide these people with more medical facilities, more services and more shelter to keep them safe."

News in brief

Co-op branches sterilized

KUWAIT: Salmiya Co-op Society announced it will close all its branches today morning to have all its employees undergo preventive medical tests for coronavirus. The co-op will re-open in the evening. Salmiya residents of can shop at Al-Rumathiya co-op during the morning period. Meanwhile, Al-Sabahiya Co-op Society announced that its chairman of the board of directors tested positive for coronavirus. As a precautionary and preventive measure, all branches of the co-op were sterilized for the safety of customers, it said, noting that all people who were in contact were isolated. Separately, an employee working for the Ministry of Education tested positive for coronavirus. As a precautionary measure, the ministry's building was sterilized yesterday morning.

Obligatory quarantine

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health warns citizens who arrived recently that they are strictly forbidden to make contact with people until the end of the obligatory period of quarantine, which is 28 days.

Medical masks

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry announced withdrawing a ministerial decision to add medical masks to the ration cards for citizens. The ministry confirmed that efforts are now focused on increasing the production capacity of masks in local factories.

Repatriation to India

KUWAIT: The Indian Embassy has urged Indian nationals in Kuwait who seek repatriation to India due to COVID-19 to fill in a prescribed form. In a press release the embassy stated that the Indian nationals may fill the form in the following link: <http://indembkwt.com/eva/>. The press release states that the purpose is only to collect data and no decision has been taken yet regarding resumption of flights to India. The embassy will make an announcement on the website and its social media accounts as and when a decision is taken by the government of India in this regard, the release added.

Kuwait, Benin talk COVID-19

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and his Benin counterpart Aurelien Agbenonci discussed Saturday means to enhance bilateral relations. In a phone conversation, Sheikh Dr Ahmad and minister Agbenonci touched on their countries' efforts to counter the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) and ways to boost cooperation in this regard.



KUWAIT: Citizens exit Kuwait International Airport after arriving on flights as part of the government's plan to repatriate Kuwaitis back home amidst the global novel coronavirus (COVID-19). — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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Local

Chinese medical team lauds Kuwait's anti-COVID measures

Kuwait can defeat coronavirus: Team leader

KUWAIT: Head of a visiting Chinese medical team has praised Kuwait's response to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, voicing his confidence in the Gulf State's ability to defeat the virus. "We believe that Kuwait will achieve very good results in fighting against coronavirus," Ruan Yuesheng, head of a Chinese expert team visiting Kuwait to help address the pandemic, said Saturday in statements to the Chinese official news agency Xinhua. The eight-member team, which arrived in Kuwait last week, comprises experts specialized in areas including virus testing, infectious disease, respiratory disease, intensive care, and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). The Chinese experts have held several meetings with officials of Kuwait's Ministry of Health and experts from Kuwait's medical sectors to share experiences in prevention and control, testing, treatment and quarantine. "In the past days, we have visited the Ministry of Health and some medical institutions, and exchanged in-depth experiences with Kuwaiti experts in public health," said Ruan. The team has also visited field medical sites related to combating the coronavirus, including epidemic testing center. "We have seen that the Kuwaiti government attaches great importance to the measures for preventing and controlling

the pandemic while preparing properly for testing, treatment, quarantine management and medical protection supplies," Ruan stressed. He noted that the team has also brought some suggestions to the Kuwaiti side. Ruan pointed out Kuwaiti experts have



Great importance to preventive measures

shown great interest in China's anti-epidemic experiences. He added that his team can also learn from good practices by the Kuwaiti side, "for example the management of people who returned from abroad, and the establishment of temporary testing centers ... such practices are very innovative and creative and worth learning from." — KUNA



KUWAIT: Members of the Chinese medical team meet with Kuwaiti officials. — KUNA

stc distributes vouchers to arriving travelers, hero front-liners

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that stc distributed 5,000 vouchers at Ambulance Centers to front-liners and at Kuwait International Airport in a humane initiative to support and welcome back arriving citizens after being away from their home country for so long. These visits under this initiative were led by Ahmad Al-Nowaiet from stc's Public Relations team.

The vouchers include exclusive promotional codes and discounts to some of Kuwait's most renowned food & beverage delivery platforms and online e-stores including Talabat, drops, Cavaraty, and COFE. In collaboration with stc, the bundled vouchers served as a welcome home gesture to the arriving citizens with the aim of making their return and adjustment more comfortable and convenient



Danah Al-Jasem

due to the current circumstances, as well as a token of appreciation to the frontliners who are sacrificing to make sure the citizens and residents of Kuwait stay healthy. This initiative is an additional step stc has implemented to support the Kuwaiti government in combating the COVID-19 outbreak by encouraging citizens and residents to stay at home.

This initiative falls under stc's previously launched "Stay Safe" campaign which aims to support Kuwait's battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with stc's social responsibility framework. Prior to distributing the vouchers, stc distributed

25,000 free allo prepaid lines to travelers arriving back to Kuwait in cooperation with Kuwait Airways and the Ministry of Health. The purpose of distributing the prepaid lines was to ensure that returning citizens had a channel to communicate with their loved ones at no cost during the mandatory isolation period.

Commenting on the initiative, Danah A-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, said, "stc partnered with 4 entities to provide both frontliners as well as citizens returning to their beloved country with digital solutions to accommodate them during the global health circumstances. Through the formed partnerships, the COFE app is offering a 50 percent discount on all orders, Cavaraty is providing a 35 percent discount on all products on its e-store, Talabat and drops are both offering free delivery on all orders within the specified validity date. On behalf of stc, we would like to thank each Company for collaborating with stc to implement this great humanitarian initiative to support the returning Kuwaiti citizens and our hero front-liners."

Jasem said, "Since the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in Kuwait, stc has worked diligently to assist the government's efforts in responding and containing the spread of infection, as well as back the preventative measures the country has set in place to combat the COVID-19 pandemic."

Jasem concluded by saying, "In line with our social and national responsibility, stc launched a series of humanitarian initiatives aimed at supporting the people of Kuwait in facing the current crisis that the country is currently going through. As a leading telecom provider, stc will continue to launch campaigns and programs to support the people of Kuwait during these difficult times while enabling digital transformation in Kuwait. Additionally, the



activities carried out by stc highlight the strengthened sense of unity and nationalism witnessed by the private sector in bolstering the state's decisions in combating the pandemic."

To better serve its customers, stc upgraded its digital channels to offer the company's array of products and services to new and existing customers from the comfort of their homes. stc's online platforms also allow customers to seamlessly execute transactions related to their accounts online and hassle free. With the upgrade came a series of online exclusive offers to enrich the customers' experience at home, whether it be online gaming, working remotely from home or enjoying services to fulfill their entertainment needs.

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Ahmad Al-Nowaiet from stc's Public Relations team during his visit to Al Adan hospital.

Local

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: This picture taken in 1924 shows Kuwait pearl diving boats in April prepared for the start of the pearl diving season in mid-May. (Source: 'Kuwait in the Eyes of Early Photographers,' William Facey, Gillian Gran, London, 1989. Prepared by: Mahmoud Aakaria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

More reasons why Muslims love Ramadan

By Shariffa Carlo

In previous articles, we explored some of the spiritual, emotional and even physical reasons why Muslims are thrilled by the prospect of spending their days depriving themselves of food, drink and other physical pleasures and their nights spent in prayer and camaraderie. In this section we will focus on the prayers and the Quran, which started it all.

Ramadan and the night prayers

Many of the people I questioned mentioned the night prayers. In Ramadan, we have a set of prayers which are extra blessings. During the year, those who make them a part of their daily prayers, normally do them alone. In Ramadan, it is highly encouraged to do so as a group, with others. For me, personally, and for most of the people who responded to my survey, it is something we fear we may not have a chance to enjoy and experience this year.

For most Muslims, the communal night prayers, where we stand, bow and prostrate ourselves in the ultimate humility and submission to our Lord, isn't a duty, it is a divine pleasure. I will undoubtedly feel the deprivation of this, this year, more than anything else I may have lost through quarantine.

Traditionally, many of us go to different mosques to listen to the Quran recitations of the various reciters. If you haven't had a chance to listen to the beautiful sounds of the Quran recited by a master, do a search online and just listen. It's glorious. My favorites include: Mishary Rashid Al-Afasy, Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais, and Yasser Al-Dossery.

Ramadan and the Quran

Ramadan is known as the Month of the Quran. The Quran was originally revealed in Ramadan. It's also the month we believe that the Angel Gabriel, peace be upon him, would review the Quran with the Prophet, peace be upon him, every night. Most of us, Muslims, try to emulate this by trying to finish reading, understanding, reciting and implementing it completely during Ramadan. "The month of Ramadan [is that] in which was revealed the Quran, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion. (21:85)

On a personal note, even before I became a Muslim, I had heard the Quran recited fabulously by an expert reciter. It was a sublime experience that touched me to my soul.

Just hearing it, without meaning, left me covered with a kind of tranquility and peace I had never experienced before. I wholeheartedly agree with those I surveyed, Ramadan, this month of delving into the Quran is something that I truly look forward to, as a means of expanding my mind and my soul.

Ramadan and Umrah

Umrah is a mini pilgrimage to the Kaaba, the sacred house in Saudi Arabia, built by Abraham (peace be upon him) and his son, Ismael. We were informed by our Prophet Muhammad, (peace be upon him), that Umrah in Ramadan is equal in blessings to Hajj (large pilgrimage) with him. So far, it doesn't look like the Kaaba will be open to visitation this year, but as Muslims, we know that "deeds are by intention", so if we have the intention that we would have gone, we will be blessed as if we had gone.

Ramadan for kids

Last, but not least, I would be reticent to forget, I did receive a couple of extra surveys from Abdul Rahman, Sarah and Hana Fahad (ages 9, 7 and 4 respectively) who let me know that they enjoy the praying, the giving to the poor, the food, the pretty party dresses (Sarah), the Eid money gifts (Eideeyahs) and the watermelon (Hana), which is apparently one of those personal family Ramadan food traditions I spoke about. They hit on many of the same things others enjoyed with a few extras.

I've gone through the major reasons many Muslims look forward to a month of fasting from sunrise to sunset, a month of extra hours' worth of prayers, a month of extra reading, extra charity and extra work. But I don't want to forget that at the end of it all, it is the faith Muslims have in their belief in God and their personal trust that His promise is true that is truly at the base of the anticipation for Ramadan.

—Courtesy of the TIES Center: The TIES Center is the social and educational hub for English Speaking Muslims in Kuwait and aims at empower Kuwait's expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society, and to facilitate opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, you can contact TIES at Tel: 25231015/6; Hotline: 94079777; e-mail: info@tiescenter.net.

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Iran's COVID-19 death toll increases to 6,156

Malaysia rounds up migrants to contain coronavirus

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ARIANA: The medical staff at the Mami hospital interact with a robot, manufactured by a Tunisian company and donated to the hospital to support their efforts in combating the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, in a hallway in the hospital in the city of Ariana north of the Tunisian capital Tunis. — AFP

Robot helps medics avoid infection

Robots and cameras: China's sci-fi quarantine watch

TUNIS: Medics have deployed a robot in a Tunisian hospital caring for coronavirus victims to limit contact between staff and infected patients, in a first for the North African country. The tall, single-limbed machine is mounted on wheels and is capable of taking pulses and checking temperatures and blood oxygen levels. It enables nurses, doctors and patients' relatives to make virtual bedside visits.

"It allows a reduction in contact with the sick and therefore the risk of contaminating personnel," said Nawel Besbes Chaouch, a doctor leading the pulmonary department at the Abderrahmane Mami hospital in Ariana, near the capital Tunis. A screen mounted at the top of the robot enables audiovisual communication with patients, who in turn can see and recognize the faces of those caring for them—an impossibility when medics otherwise have to use full protective gear. A website allows families to reserve a time slot for a virtual visit, where the robot is remote-controlled into the patient's room to allow a video conversation. The robot was designed and made in Tunisia, by Enova, a start-up based in Sousse.



Robot in Tunisian hospital caring for COVID-19 victims

At one quarantine hotel in central Beijing, a guard sits at a desk on each floor to monitor all movements. The solitude is broken by one of the few visitors allowed near the rooms: A three-foot-tall cylindrical robot that delivers water bottles, meals and packages to hotel guests. The robot rides the elevator and navigates hallways on its own to minimize contact between guests and human staff.

When the robot arrives at its destination, it dials the landline phone in the room and informs the occupant in an eerie, childlike voice: "Hello, this is your service robot. Your order has arrived outside your room." Its belly opens and the guest takes the delivery items before the robot turns and rolls away. Doctors in hazmat suits go from room to room daily reminding occupants, including an AFP journalist who had been in Hubei, to take their temperatures with the mercury thermometer provided at check-in, and to ask if any are experiencing symptoms. People under home quarantine elsewhere in the

city have had silent electronic alarms installed on their doors. Officials put up a notice on each quarantined household's door asking neighbors to keep an eye on the confined inhabitants. In one Beijing residential compound, officials said that people under home quarantine must inform community volunteers whenever they open their doors. Friederike Boege, a German journalist, began her second quarantine in Beijing this year yesterday after returning from Hubei's capital Wuhan.

Her building's management installed a camera in front of her door to monitor her movements. "It's quite scary how you get used to such things," she said. "Apart from the camera I do believe that the guards and the cleaner on the compound would denunciate me if I were to go out," Boege said. During her previous quarantine experience in March after returning from a trip to Thailand, she was reported to building management by a cleaner for going downstairs to take out the trash.



BEIJING: Photo shows a robot capable of taking elevators and navigating hallways on its own delivering food to a guest at a quarantine hotel housing people from Hubei province in Beijing. — AFP

Robots and cameras

Robots delivering meals, ghostly figures in hazmat suits and cameras pointed at front doors: China's methods to enforce coronavirus quarantines have looked like a sci-fi dystopia for legions of people. Authorities have taken drastic steps to ensure that people do not break isolation rules after China largely tamed the virus that had paralyzed the country for months. With cases imported from abroad threatening to unravel China's progress, travelers arriving from overseas have been required to stay home or in designated hotels for 14 days.

Beijing loosened the rule in the capital this week - except for those arriving from abroad and Hubei, the province where the virus first surfaced late last year.

No human contact

Total isolation has become a temporary norm for those under strict quarantine, without even a single trip to the grocery store or walk to break up the monotony. Joy Zhong, a 25-year-old media professional returning to Beijing from a work trip in the virus epicenter of Wuhan, spent three weeks without leaving a cramped room at another hotel in the Chinese capital.

There, guests were not allowed to order their own food and were instead given standardized meals. Friends were allowed to bring packages to the front desk, which were then left outside hotel rooms by staff who avoided direct contact with guests. "Spending 21 days in a row without seeing

a single person, it felt like time was passing extremely slowly," Zhong told AFP.

Not all people under quarantine are as closely watched as those in Beijing, however. Charlotte Poirot, a French teacher who arrived in China in late March - just before a ban on foreigners entering the country was introduced - spent two weeks under quarantine at a hostel in the southeastern city Guangzhou. She was confined alone in a 10-bunk room, with meals delivered to her door and medical personnel coming to check her temperature multiple times a day. "They never locked the door and the (whole) process was based on reliance," Poirot said. "We all played the game without contesting." — Agencies

UK shadows Italy as worst hit in Europe

LONDON: The United Kingdom's COVID-19 death toll rose 621 to 28,131 as of May 1, just short of Italy which has so far had the world's second most deadly outbreak of the disease after the United States. As Britain shadows Italy for the grim status of being the worst hit country in Europe, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is facing criticism from opposition parties who say his government stumbled in the early stages of the outbreak.

Housing minister Robert Jenrick gave the latest UK figures at a Downing Street briefing on Saturday. The United States has had 64,740 deaths, followed by Italy with 28,710 and the United Kingdom on 28,131 and then Spain on 25,100, according to a Reuters tally. Italy, which has a population of 60 million, said its death toll rose 474 as of Saturday. The United Kingdom has a population of about 67 million.

Johnson, 55, initially resisted introducing a lockdown to restrict economic and public activity, but changed course when projections showed a quarter of a million people could die. Johnson himself battled COVID-19 last month, spending three days in intensive care. He returned to work on Monday, telling the nation that people around the world were looking at the United Kingdom's "apparent success".

Tests for easing lockdown

He has said the country is over the peak but that it is still too early to relax the lockdown he imposed on March 23 because there could be a second peak that he fears might overwhelm hospitals. The \$3.0 trillion British economy, the world's fifth largest, is stalling and Johnson is due next week to present a possible way to get the country back to work without triggering a second spike in cases. He has set five tests that must be met before he can lift the lockdown - with a reduction in the daily death toll and prevention of a second deadly peak among the key ones. Government scientists say that while the daily death tolls show a downward trend they expect them to plateau for a while. — Reuters

Egypt director of video critical of Sisi dies in jail

BEIRUT: A young Egyptian film-maker imprisoned for directing a music video critical of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has died in a Cairo jail, his lawyer said Saturday. Shady Habash, 24, died in Tora prison, said lawyer Ahmed Al-Khawaga, who was unable to give a cause of death. "His health had been deteriorating for several days.... He was hospitalized, then returned to the prison yesterday evening where he died in the night," he said, without giving further details. Habash was detained in March 2018, accused of "spreading fake news" and "belonging to an illegal organization", according to the prosecution.

He was arrested after having directed the music video for the song "Balaha" by rock singer Ramy Essam. The song's lyrics lambast "Balaha" - a name given to Sisi by his detractors in reference to a character in an Egyptian film known for being a notorious liar. Essam gained popularity during the popular revolt against then-president Hosni Mubarak in early 2011. He has since gone into exile in Sweden. The video has had more than five million views on YouTube.

The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) said in a Twitter post that Habash died as a result of "negligence and lack of justice". Human rights groups have regularly highlighted poor prison conditions in Egypt. In a Thursday statement, PEN America described Habash's death in custody as "a devastating blow to artistic freedom". "With Habash's death, (Sisi) has sent a disturbing signal to the rest of the world: share views that I disagree with and you might face a de facto death sentence," said Julie Trebault, director of PEN America's Artists at Risk program.

Since early March, due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, authorities have suspended visits and the work of the courts, further isolating detainees. "Due to the measures taken against the coronavirus, no-one has been able to see (Habash)" recently, said Khawaga. Habash himself warned of his predicament back in October, in a letter posted Saturday on Facebook by activist Ahdaf Soueif. "It's not prison that kills, it's the loneliness that kills... I'm dying slowly each day," he wrote.

Fearing the spread of the virus in overcrowded prisons, human rights defenders have called for the release of political prisoners and detainees awaiting trial. According to several NGOs, an estimated 60,000 detainees in Egypt are political prisoners, including secular activists, journalists, lawyers, academics and Islamists arrested in an ongoing crackdown against dissent since the military's 2013 ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi. — AFP

International

Coronavirus sweeping through massive US prison population

COVID-19 blasting through the world's largest prison

WASHINGTON: A massive wave of coronavirus infections is blasting through the world's largest prison population in the United States even as officials begin opening up their economies, saying the disease has plateaued. One prison in Marion, Ohio has become the most intensely infected institution across the country, with more than 80 percent of its nearly 2,500 inmates, and 175 staff on top of that, testing positive for COVID-19.

Coronavirus deaths are on the increase in jails and penitentiaries across the country, with officials having few options—they are unable to force adequate distancing in crowded cells and facing shortages of medical personnel and personal protective gear everywhere. The threat to the 2.3 million-strong US prison population was seen last week in the death of Andrea Circle Bear, a 30-year-old native American woman from South Dakota. Pregnant when she was placed in a Texas federal prison in March on drug charges, she soon became sick with the disease and was placed on a ventilator, and gave birth by C-section. She remained on the ventilator and died weeks later.

'Time bomb'

Riots over inadequate protection and slow responses by prison authorities have already taken place in prisons in Washington state and Kansas. COVID-19 outbreaks among prison officers meanwhile have made the institutions even harder to manage. At the understaffed, undersupplied Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas on Thursday, 15-year prison guard David Carter resigned, saying it was better to go without pay than risk his health and

that of his family. "I can no longer be associated with a facility that is a ticking time bomb," he said in a resignation letter.

Low priority

The Marion prison outbreak is believed only the tip of the iceberg. Because of the hodge-podge of prison management—federal, state, and local authorities have their own, and many are run by for-profit private companies—testing and reporting has been haphazard. Covid Prison Data, a group of university criminal justice and data experts, says that based on public reports, 13,436 inmates and 5,312 corrections staff nationwide have tested positive for coronavirus.

But many states, and the federal penitentiary system, have done only a small amount of testing. Five of the 50 states don't even report data. Prisons occupied eight spaces on The New York Times' compilation of the top 10 infected institutions, with the Marion Correctional Institution at the top. The reasons are clear: prison populations are more dense and harder to separate than nursing homes and cruise ships, two institutions hit hardest by the disease. They also operate at lower levels of hygiene, and a large number of inmates have pre-existing conditions. And, until now, they have been low priority for officials battling the pandemic.

'No option to close prisons'

Numbers released this past week show the depth of the problem. The federal Bureau of Prisons, which has 152,000 inmates and 36,000 staff, found outbreaks in more than half of its 122 facilities. Less than 3,000 tests have been administered, however,



OHIO: Police officers on horses patrol as demonstrators protest outside the Ohio statehouse in opposition of Governor DeWine's stay-at-home order in Columbus, Ohio. — AFP

with 1,842 prisoners and 343 staff testing positive, and 36 inmate deaths.

On Thursday alone the bureau reported three deaths at the low security Terminal Island prison near Los Angeles, where some 60 percent of the roughly 1,050 inmate population has registered

positive. Bureau of Prisons Director Michael Carvajal complained of a shortage of testing supplies, and said that quarantining remains difficult. "We don't have the option to close our doors, or pick who or when someone is sent to our custody," he said on Wednesday. — AFP

News in brief

Nearly 10,000 inmates freed

MANILA: Nearly 10,000 prison inmates have been released in the Philippines as the country races to halt coronavirus infections in its overcrowded jails, a Supreme Court official said Saturday. The move follows a directive to lower courts to release those awaiting trial in prison because they could not afford bail. Associate Supreme Court Justice Mario Victor Leonen told reporters. "The court is very much aware of the congested situation in our prisons," Leonen told reporters as he announced the release of 9,731 inmates. COVID-19 outbreaks have been reported at some of the country's most overcrowded jails, affecting both inmates as well as corrections personnel. Social distancing is all but impossible in the country's prison system, where cells are sometimes filled to five times their capacity due to inadequate infrastructure and a slow-moving and overburdened judicial system. — AFP

North, South exchange gunfire

SEOUL: North Korea fired multiple gunshots towards the South in the Demilitarized Zone dividing the peninsula yesterday, prompting South Korean troops to fire back, Seoul's military said. The rare exchange of gunfire comes following the reappearance a day earlier of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un after a near three-week absence from the public eye that triggered intense speculation about his health. A South Korean guard post was hit by several shots from the North, the joint chiefs of staff (JCS) said in a statement, adding no casualties were reported on the South's side. "Our military responded with two rounds of gunfire and a warning announcement according to our manual," Seoul said. — AFP

Army salutes frontline workers

WASHINGTON: Military jets flew over US cities on Saturday to salute frontline workers in the country with the highest coronavirus caseload and death toll in the world. Residents of the nation's capital Washington, as well as Baltimore and Atlanta were treated to sights of the Navy's Blue Angels and the Air Force's Thunderbirds arcing across the sky. Crowds turned out on the National Mall to see the jets fly in formation past sites such as the US Capitol and the Washington Monument. Most of those in attendance appeared to be following social distancing rules, and many wore face masks. "Proud to see the #AmericaStrong salute to our healthcare & frontline workers with a spectacular flyover today in Washington, DC. — AFP

Strong quake strikes off Crete

ATHENS: A 6.0 magnitude quake struck off the Greek island of Crete on Saturday but there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage. The Athens Geodynamic Institute said the epicenter was about 55 kilometers south of the city of Ierapetra. It hit at 12:51 GMT. "No victims or serious damage has been reported so far," a local police officer told AFP by telephone. Tremors were felt across the island and landslides were reported on some roads in Lasithi, where Ierapetra is located, the fire service said. "Luckily the quake happened at a depth of 19 kilometers in the sea and there has not been any serious damage so far," said Giorgos Aspadrakis, the head of the fire brigade in Lasithi. "The quake went on for a long time," said Georgia Santamouri, 29, who lives at Heraklion - almost 100 km from Ierapetra. — AFP

Venezuelan prison riot leaves 47 dead

CARACAS: A prison riot has left at least 47 dead and 75 wounded in western Venezuela, a country where NGOs and inmates' families regularly denounce unsanitary conditions, violence and overcrowding behind bars. The Venezuelan Prison Observatory (OVP) rights group provided the figures for the riot, which happened Friday afternoon at the Los Llanos prison center in Guanare city.

Parliamentary Deputy Maria Beatriz Martinez, who represents Portuguesa state where the prison is located, said: "At the moment we have been able to confirm 47 dead and 75 wounded." Martinez and the NGO said all of the dead were detainees. According to an army report on Friday, the disruption started when inmates began destroying "the security fences around the perimeter" in a "massive escape attempt." It also said the prison's director was wounded.

Spain eases strict virus lockdown as US approves drug

MADRID: Spaniards took to the streets to jog, cycle and rollerskate for the first time after 48 days of confinement on Saturday as some European nations cautiously eased virus lockdowns and Russia faced a large spike in new infections. As governments across the globe weigh how to lift restrictions to restart economies against the risk of new infections, US authorities brought some hope by approving an experimental drug for emergency use on coronavirus patients.

The decision was the latest step in a global push to find treatments and a vaccine for the coronavirus, which has left half of humanity under some form of lockdown and pushed the world economy towards its worst downturn since the Great Depression in the 1930s. The virus has killed nearly 239,000 people worldwide and caused more than 3.3 million confirmed infections since it emerged in China late last year. With signs the pandemic in their hardest-hit nations is slowing, European countries and some parts of the US have begun to lift restrictions to try to inject life into economies crippled by weeks of closure.

From Madrid to Mallorca, Spaniards flocked to the streets as they were allowed to exercise and walk freely outside as the government eased seven weeks of strict lockdown in a country with one of the highest number of fatalities at nearly 25,000. "After so many weeks in confinement, I badly wanted to go out, run, see the world," said financial advisor Marcos Abeytua in Madrid's Chueca district who got up at 7am to enjoy some time outside. "Yesterday, I was like a child on Christmas Eve."

Near the city's Retiro park, many residents were out to running, sometimes in groups, as a policeman used a loudspeaker to urge them to keep out of the deserted avenue and on the pavement. Crowds of runners mingled with cyclists and skateboarders enjoying sports in the sun in Barcelona's seaside neighborhood. "This all seems a bit crazy to me. On the first day we get some freedom I don't see any safe distancing at all," said Christian, an Italian living in Barcelona. "I didn't expect to see thousands of people running like this."

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez however said masks would be obligatory on public transport from Monday, and children and elderly will still face some time restrictions on when they can go outside. Spain, Germany, Austria and Scandinavian nations are all gradually easing lockdowns as the virus cases slow though they will keep in place social dis-



GUANARE: Video grab of relatives of inmates reacting outside Los Llanos prison, in Guanare, Portuguesa state, Venezuela after a riot occurred. — AFP

Martinez refuted that account, stating the uprising was staged by a group of prisoners "because they did not have access to food." According to OVP, guards opened fire following the incident at the facility, which has a capacity for 750 inmates but houses some 2,500. With the coronavirus pandemic raging, visits from family

and friends—who often bring food and medicine to inmates—have been greatly reduced.

"What is happening right now is because of the guards. They don't transfer the food" brought by families to the inmates, Jessica Jimenez, who knows someone inside the prison, told AFP. The identities of those killed were verified "through the morgue, thanks to relatives who recognized the dead in photos that were shown to them on a computer," said Carolina Giron of OVP. She added inmates' family and friends "don't have access to the hospital."

According to the organization, 97 deaths occurred in Venezuelan prisons last year, 70 percent of which were due to diseases such as tuberculosis and a lack of medicine. More than 330 cases of coronavirus, including 10 deaths, have been recorded in Venezuela, but authorities say there have been no cases in the country's jails. Opposition leader Juan Guaido has refuted Venezuela's official count, accusing the government of Socialist President Nicolas Maduro of "shamelessly lying." The initial toll Friday from the riot was 17 dead and nine wounded. — AFP



SAN SEBASTIAN: A woman pushes an elderly man on a wheelchair along an esplanade in La Concha beach in San Sebastian during the hours allowed by the government to exercise, for the first time since the beginning of a national lockdown to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease. — AFP

tancing measures, the use of masks and testing to try to track infections.

France, which will lift parts of its lockdown on May 11, on Saturday decided to extend a health emergency by two months until late July. After a two-month shutdown, Italians today will be allowed to stroll in parks and visit relatives. Restaurants can open for takeout and wholesale stores can resume business. "We must maintain social distancing, maximum hygiene levels, and masks. We've done our bit to the best of our ability. From Monday, it's up to you," emergency response official Domenico Arcuri said at a press conference. "I implore you, do not lower your guards."

In Russia, though, authorities reported the largest increase in coronavirus cases with the new infections rising by nearly 10,000 in a single day. In Moscow, the epicenter of Russia's outbreak, around 2 percent of the population is infected by COVID-19, the disease caused by coronavirus, officials said. "The threat is apparently on the rise," Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, said on his blog earlier Saturday.

More than 3.3 million cases of infection have been officially diagnosed in 195 countries, including 1.5 million in Europe alone. That number is likely only a fraction of true cases as testing is still limited. The United States has the most deaths with more than 65,000, followed by Italy with 28,236, the United Kingdom with 27,510, Spain with 25,100 deaths and France with 24,594 fatalities. US President Donald Trump on Friday announced that Remdesivir, an antiviral drug initially developed to treat Ebola, was given the green light for use after a major trial found that it boosted recovery in serious COVID-19 patients. "It's really a very promising situation," Trump said on Friday at the White House. The drug incorporates itself into the virus's genome, short-circuiting its replication process. — AFP

UK PM says doctors had plan in case he died of COVID-19

LONDON: Doctors treating Boris Johnson for coronavirus prepared to announce his death after he was taken to intensive care, the British prime minister said on Sunday, in his first detailed comments about his illness. "It was a tough old moment, I won't deny it," he was quoted as saying by the Sun on Sunday newspaper in an interview. "They had a strategy to deal with a 'death of Stalin'-type scenario."

"I was not in particularly brilliant shape and I was aware there were contingency plans in place. The doctors had all sorts of arrangements for what to do if things went badly wrong," Johnson, 55, first announced he had contracted COVID-19 on March 27 but maintained he had only mild symptoms. Yet he failed to shake the illness after a week of self-isolation.

He was taken to hospital as a precaution on April 5 for further tests but within 24 hours was moved to intensive care. The Conservative party leader spent three days receiving "oxygen support", and admitted after his discharge on April 12 that his fight with the virus "could have gone either way". But although he told the newspaper he did think "how am I going to get out of this?", he did not think at any point he was going to die.

Johnson, who returned to work last Monday and became a father again when his fiancée Carrie Symonds gave birth on Wednesday, said he was given "liters and liters" of oxygen in hospital. He said he felt frustrated he was not getting better but the reality hit home when doctors were deliberating whether to intubate him and put him on a ventilator. "That was when it got a bit... they were starting to think about how to handle it presentationally," he told the weekly tabloid.

Johnson has repeatedly paid tribute to staff of the state-run National Health Service (NHS) for their care. He and Symonds' baby boy, Wilfred Lawrie Nicholas Johnson, is named in part after two of the doctors who led his care - doctors Nick Price and Nick Hart. Both are experts in infectious diseases and ventilation.

Symonds, 32, said in an Instagram post earlier to announce the boy's name that Hart and Price "saved Boris' life last month". The Sun on Sunday said Johnson was emotional when recalling his treatment and recovery, which he called "an extraordinary thing". He said he had been "in denial" about the seriousness of his condition at first, as he tried to continue to work despite feeling "pretty groggy". — AFP

International

Malaysia authorities round up migrants to contain COVID-19

Arrested could push vulnerable groups into hiding: UN

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian authorities are rounding up undocumented migrants as part of efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus, officials said, after hundreds of migrants and refugees were detained in the capital Kuala Lumpur. Authorities said 586 undocumented migrants were arrested during a Friday raid in a downtown area where many foreigners live, a move the United Nations said could push vulnerable groups into hiding and prevent them from seeking treatment.

Those detained included young children and ethnic Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, rights groups had said. Police said the operation was aimed at preventing undocumented migrants from travelling to other areas amid movement curbs imposed to contain the spread of the virus outbreak, state news agency Bernama reported. The United Nations urged Malaysia to avoid detaining migrants and release all children and their caregivers, warning that overcrowded detention centers carried a high risk of increasing the virus' spread.

"The fear of arrest and detention may push these vulnerable population groups further into hiding and prevent them from seeking treatment, with negative consequences for their own health and creating further risks to the spreading of COVID-19 to others," the United Nations said in a statement. The arrests followed public anger in recent days over

the presence of migrant foreigners, particularly Rohingya refugees, with some in Malaysia accusing them of spreading the coronavirus and being a burden on state resources.

Malaysia has around 2 million registered foreign workers but authorities estimate many more are living in the Southeast Asian country without proper documents. Malaysia does not formally recognize refugees, regarding them as illegal migrants. Security minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob refuted criticism of the arrests, saying that all of those detained had been screened and found to have tested negative for COVID-19. They would be sent to immigration detention centres to await further action, he told reporters on Saturday.

"Even though the migrants were living under lockdown, their presence here is still illegal," Ismail Sabri said. "There is no issue of cruelty towards these migrants as they have been well taken care of... but action must still be taken against them under the law." The neighborhood where the raid had taken place was close to an area with three buildings that had been placed under strict lockdowns last month after a surge in coronavirus cases there.

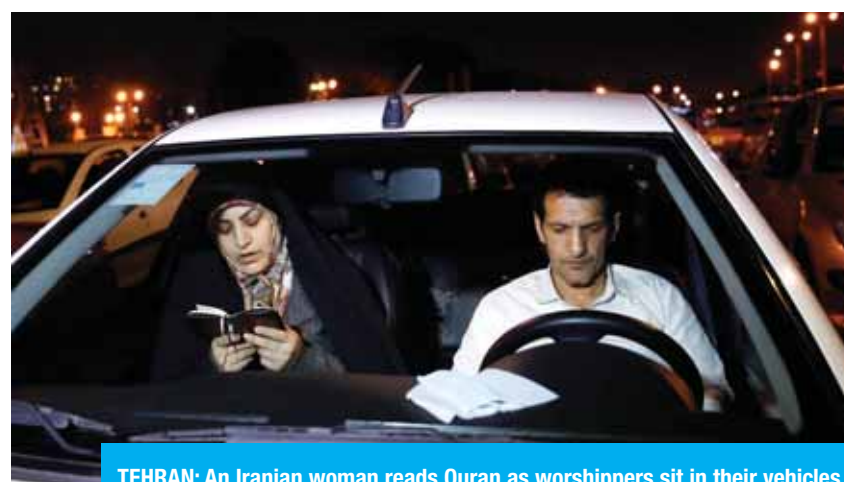
Around 9,000 people live in the buildings, most of whom are foreign nationals, and 235 of them have tested positive for COVID-19, the government has

Taleban, US engage in Twitter spat amid rise in violence

KABUL: Representatives of US forces in Afghanistan and Taleban insurgents engaged in a rare public spat on Saturday, venting on social media about the stalling Afghan peace process. After lengthy talks behind closed doors, the Taleban and United States signed an agreement in February for reduced violence and a move towards talks with the Afghan government, but attacks by the group have increased since then.

Sonny Leggett, spokesman for US forces in Afghanistan, used Twitter to address his Taleban counterpart on Saturday, saying US forces wanted the peace process to move forward, but would respond if the militant group continued to increase attacks. "Attacks generate attacks, while restraint produces restraint. If the violence cannot be reduced - then yes, there will be responses," Leggett, said on Twitter, tagging and addressing Taleban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid.

Mujahid responded that the path to a resolution lies in the implementation of the Doha agreement. "Do not harm the current environment with pointless & provocative statements," Mujahid tweeted to Leggett, adding, "we are committed to our end, honor your own obligations." The Taleban say the United States has not pushed the Afghan govern-



TEHRAN: An Iranian woman reads Quran as worshippers sit in their vehicles while taking part in a religious ceremony during the holy month of Ramadan in a parking area of Tehran's Eram park amid the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

Iran COVID-19 death toll hits 6,156

DUBAI: Iran's death toll from new coronavirus increased by 65 over the previous 24 hours to reach 6,156 on Saturday, Health Ministry spokesman Kianush Jahanpur said in a statement on state TV. The total number of diagnosed cases in Iran, one of the Middle Eastern countries hardest hit by the pandemic, has reached 96,448, up by 802 in the past 24 hours, the lowest daily increase rate in weeks, he said, adding that 2,787 were in critical condition. A total of 77,350, or 80% of those infected, had so far recovered, he said. Iranian health officials have been warning of a new wave of the disease if health regulations are not strictly followed.

"If people do not observe health

protocols, the disease will certainly return," said Mohammad Mehdi Gouya, director of the Health Ministry's communicable diseases department. Only 10% of the inhabitants of the most affected cities had been infected with coronavirus, Gouya told the semi-official ISNA news agency. "This means that 90% have not yet been infected with the virus. Therefore, we must not think it's over and leave home and make social visits as we please ... There is no other option but to observe proper social distancing," he said.

Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi said a decision would be made on Sunday on the reopening of schools and Shiite holy sites. Iran, which has been struggling to curb the spread of the disease, is concerned that measures to limit public activities could wreck an economy which has already been battered by US sanctions that were reimposed in 2018. Iranian authorities blame the sanctions for hampering their efforts to combat the disease. — Reuters



PENANG: Passengers speak to a worker wearing a protective face mask and gloves as they check in for a flight at Penang International Airport as AirAsia resumed domestic flights in Malaysia after the airline's operations were curtailed due to the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

said. Malaysia has reported a total of 6,176 coronavirus cases and 103 deaths. Its prime minister has also announced a partial easing of six-week long curbs that have caused a damaging economic slowdown, with most businesses expected to reopen from Monday. Malaysia will allow most businesses to re-

open from next week, the prime minister said, easing a lockdown to fight the spread of the coronavirus as the country's outbreak slows. The Southeast Asian nation in mid-March ordered the closure of all but essential businesses as well as schools and asked people to stay home, as cases surged. — Agencies



JALALABAD: Muslim men sleep on carpets at a mosque during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in Jalalabad. — AFP

ment to implement a prisoner exchange mentioned in the agreement, which stipulated the exchange of 6,000 prisoners - 5,000 members of the insurgent group and 1,000 of the Afghan forces.

Leggett conceded there has been a reduction of violence against cities and against coalition forces. "But we spoke of ALL sides reducing violence by as much as 80% to pave the way for peace talks,"

Leggett added, referring to increased attacks on Afghan forces.

The Taleban have mounted more than 4,500 attacks since signing a deal with the United States, according to data seen by Reuters. The provinces hardest hit are ones with the most COVID-19 infections, which are spreading rapidly across the war-torn country. — Reuters

Islamic State kills 10 paramilitaries north of Baghdad

SAMARRA: Ten Iraqi paramilitaries were killed in Islamic State group attacks north of Baghdad overnight, security forces said Saturday, the deadliest operation by jihadist sleeper cells in months. Iraq declared IS defeated in late 2017 but remnants of the group still wage hit-and-run attacks on security forces in remote areas of the north and west.

Early Saturday, the jihadists attacked fighters of Iraq's Hashed Al-Shaabi paramilitary force stationed outside a town about 180 kilometers north of Baghdad, according to a statement by Iraq's security forces. "Six fighters were killed. As another unit was dispatched to reinforce them, an explosive device detonated on that convoy and killed three fighters," the statement said. A 10th fighter was killed in a separate IS attack on nearby unit from the Hashed, a network of armed groups incorporated into the regular army chain of command.

A security source in Salahaddin province, where the attack took place, told AFP that the first IS ambush took place just before midnight. "All the Iraqi security forces manning the checkpoint were killed. F16 planes are flying overhead to search for the IS fighters," the source said. The attack was IS's deadliest in several months and appeared to cap a period of

more numerous and aggressive operations. Last week, the jihadists claimed a suicide attack that wounded four outside an intelligence headquarters in the northern province of Kirkuk.

"The group's attacks have seemingly grown bolder over the past month or so, as it's increasingly launched direct assaults on Iraqi security forces and carried out some daytime attacks," Sam Heller, an independent analyst focused on IS and Iraq said. "Last night's attack, if it was in fact coordinated between several IS units, would mark a new escalation by the group," he added. IS overran around a third of Iraq in 2014, triggering the creation of both a US-led coalition to defeat the jihadists and the Hashed, comprised mostly of Shiite units with ties to Iran - Iraq's neighbor but a foe to Washington.

The two forces are at odds in Iraq, as the US blames hardline Hashed factions for deadly rocket attacks on its troops while the Hashed and allied politicians have demanded US troops leave the country. In recent months, the coalition has pulled back from five bases where it had been deployed to help track down IS sleeper cells, saying the Iraqi military could largely finish the fight on their own. The coalition is still backing Iraqi troops with air strikes, intelligence and surveillance. — AFP

Trump hails Kim reappearance

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Saturday welcomed the reemergence of North Korea's Kim Jong Un after weeks of speculation about his health, but prospects for the US efforts to persuade Pyongyang to denuclearize appear as bleak as ever. On Saturday, North Korean media said Kim cut a ribbon at a ceremony on Friday to mark the completion of a fertilizer plant.

It had not reported on Kim's whereabouts since he presided over a meeting on April 11, provoking speculation that he was seriously ill and raising concerns about instability in his nuclear-armed country that could affect other North Asian countries and the United States. Kim was seen in photographs smiling and talking to aides at the ceremony and also touring the plant. The authenticity of the photos could not be verified.

A US government source familiar with intelligence reporting said Washington strongly believes Kim is alive, but has not been able to confirm the photos were taken on Friday, or explain why he had not been seen for weeks. Trump, who met Kim three times in 2018 and 2019 in unprecedented but unsuccessful personal attempts to persuade him to give up his nuclear weapons, tweeted on Saturday: "I, for one, am glad to see he is back, and well!"

Trump has continued to refer to Kim as a friend, but the mystery of the past three weeks has served to emphasize the limits of that relationship and his lack of progress in persuading North Korea to give up a weapons program that now threatens the United States. The lack of a clear successor for Kim has raised fears about the security of the program in the event of political turmoil in North Korea, which borders US strategic rival China and US allies South Korea and Japan.

On Thursday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington was monitoring the situation closely and that the US focus remained on "making sure that that country doesn't have nuclear weapons." North Korea has shown no willingness to abandon weapons it sees as vital for defense of the nation and the Kim dynasty. "I would think we are back to where we were," said Joseph Yun, who was a US North Korea envoy under former President Barack Obama and at the start of the Trump administration.

"US-North Korea talks going nowhere; Kim Jong Un pushing the envelope, say through short-range missile tests; Trump hoping that nothing much happens at least through the November elections." Since US-North Korea talks stalled last year, Kim has personally presided over numerous short-range missile tests, but has resisted a return to long-range missile and nuclear testing suspended since 2017.

Analysts say the scare over Kim's health emphasized the need for thorough contingency planning, something complicated by the coronavirus pandemic. "I doubt we'll ever have much clarity on what Kim did over the past couple of weeks and the anxiety it caused sparked some real questions about how prepared we are prepared to deal with this kind of circumstance," said Jenny Town of 38 North, a Washington-based North Korea analysis project.

"No one seemed particularly prepared to respond in case of a North Korean crisis given the current political conditions. That is something that should be addressed." — Reuters

Business

MONDAY, MAY 4, 2020

10 Oil-hungry Asian nations pounce on low prices to build stockpiles**11** India lockdown curbs buffalo meat exports, hitting Ramadan supplies**11** How Spain's free taxis helped battle the virus

RIYADH: Saudi women, wearing protective face masks, walk into the Tiba gold market in the capital Riyadh after the partial lifting of the curfew. Saudi Arabia will take strict and painful measures to deal with the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the finance minister said on Saturday. —AFP

Saudi to take 'strict, painful' measures

Kingdom to borrow close to \$60bn this year to plug huge deficit

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia will take strict and painful measures to deal with the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the finance minister said on Saturday, adding that "all options for dealing with the crisis are open". "We must reduce budget expenditures sharply", Mohammed Al-Jadaan said in an interview with Al Arabiya TV, adding that the impact of the new coronavirus on Saudi Arabia's state finances will appear from the second quarter of the year.

"Saudi finances need more discipline and the road ahead is long," he said. He said the world's leading crude exporter would borrow close to \$60 billion this year to plug a huge budget deficit. Saudi Jadwa Investment, an independent think-tank, forecast Thursday that the kingdom would post a record \$112 billion budget deficit this year.

One measure would be to slow down government projects, including mega-projects, to reduce spending, he said. The world's largest oil exporter is suffering from historically low oil prices, while measures to fight the coronavirus are likely to curb the pace and scale of economic reforms launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Saudi Arabia's central bank foreign exchange reserves fell in March at their fastest rate in at least 20 years, hitting their lowest level since 2011, while the kingdom slipped to a \$9 billion budget deficit in the first quarter as oil revenue collapsed.

Jadaan said last month that Riyadh could borrow \$26 billion more this year while it would draw down up to \$32 billion from its foreign reserves to finance the deficit. On

Saturday Jadaan told Al Arabiya Saudi Arabia had used some revenue from investments to plug the deficit, and that the crisis presented investment opportunities. Jadaan noted the country had introduced stimulus measures aimed at preserving jobs in the private sector and safeguarding the provision of basic services.

Meanwhile, Saudi shares slumped 6.8 percent as trading opened yesterday, a day after the finance minister announced "painful" measures to tackle the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. Almost all the listed stocks on the Arab world's largest bourse were in the red just minutes after the start of trading. "Some of these measures could be painful," he said in an interview with Saudi-owned news channel Al-Arabiya.

The International Monetary Fund in April projected that the Saudi economy would contract by 2.3 percent this year. Capital Economics, a London-based think-tank, said the contraction would be at least 5.0 percent.

In other bourses in the oil-rich Gulf, Dubai Financial market dropped 3.2 percent Sunday while its sister Abu Dhabi Stock Exchange was down 1.6 percent. Qatar's bourse was 0.6 percent lower while Kuwait's premier index and all-

shares index were 1.0 percent and 0.8 percent, respectively. The small bourses of Oman and Bahrain were flat.

OPEC output

Meanwhile, OPEC oil output has jumped in April to a 13-month high as Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies opened the taps following the collapse of an OPEC-led supply pact, offsetting further declines in Libya, Iran and Venezuela. On average, the 13-member Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries has pumped 30.25 million barrels per day (bpd) this month, according to the survey, up 1.61 million bpd from March's revised figure.

An OPEC-led supply pact collapsed on March 6, temporarily ending three years of cooperation and starting a battle for market share. This free-for-all lasted until the producers, known as OPEC+, agreed a new cutback from May 1.

The resulting glut compounded the hit to prices that the coronavirus outbreak is having on demand, sending oil to a 21-year low below \$16 a barrel this month. Even though prices are now rising, the supply outlook remains ample, analysts say. "Global oil demand is expected to improve as

lockdowns are eased," said Tamas Varga of oil broker PVM. "As encouraging as it sounds, it will not lead to supply deficit in coming months." While OPEC's Gulf members have already begun to limit supply, it has a long way to go to reach the new target. OPEC's share of the cut is 6.084 million bpd and based on April's output, members need to curb supply by 6.97 million bpd.

Saudi record

The biggest increase in supply came from Saudi Arabia, which pumped a record 11.3 million bpd. Still, that is less than expected - a source briefed on Saudi policy had said April output reached 12.3 million bpd. The April figure would have been even higher had some buyers of Saudi crude asked to cancel cargoes because of reduced demand, industry sources said.

The United Arab Emirates also ramped up production to 3.85 million bpd, sources in the survey said, believed to be a record monthly rate for OPEC's third-largest producer. Kuwait and Nigeria also boosted output. Iraq, a laggard in making cuts in 2019, curbed output according to the survey, due to reduced exports from ports in the north and south of the country. Angola pumped less because of lower scheduled exports.

Venezuela, Iran and Libya all reduced output in April. All three were exempt from voluntary OPEC curbs because of US sanctions or internal issues limiting production. —Agencies



Saudi stocks dive after Jadaan remarks

cooperation and starting a battle for market share. This free-for-all lasted until the producers, known as OPEC+, agreed a new cutback from May 1.

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Virus cannot stop America or Berkshire: Buffett

NEW YORK: Billionaire investor Warren Buffett on Saturday said the United States' capacity to withstand crises provides a silver lining as it combats the coronavirus, even as he acknowledged that the global pandemic could significantly damage the economy and his investments.

Over more than 4-1/2 hours at the annual meeting of Berkshire Hathaway Inc, Buffett said his conglomerate has taken many steps responding to the pandemic, including providing cash to struggling operating units, and throwing in the towel on a multi-billion-dollar bet on US airlines. Buffett also said he remains keen on making a big acquisition, which he has not done since 2016, but has not provided financial support to companies as he did during the 2008 financial crisis because he saw nothing attractive enough, even after the recent bear market.

The 89-year-old opened the meeting in Omaha, Nebraska with 1-3/4 hours of remarks to soothe anxious investors, urging them to stay committed to stocks despite this year's bear market, even if the pan-

demetic gets a second wind late this year. Illustrating his remarks with dozens of plain black-and-white slides, Buffett called dealing with the pandemic "quite an experiment" that had an "extraordinarily wide" range of possible economic outcomes.

But he said Americans have persevered and prospered through such crises as the Civil War in the 1860s, the influenza pandemic a century ago and the Great Depression. American "magic" prevailed before and would do again, he said. "Nothing can stop America when you get right down to it," Buffett said. "I will bet on America the rest of my life."

The meeting was held virtually for the first time because of the pandemic, without shareholders in attendance, and streamed by Yahoo Finance. Buffett and Vice Chairman Greg Abel, 57, spent nearly 2-1/2 hours answering shareholder questions posed by a reporter. Abel has day-to-day oversight of Berkshire's non-insurance businesses, and is considered by many analysts and investors a top candidate to eventually succeed Buffett as chief executive.

Berkshire exits airlines

The meeting began several hours after Berkshire reported a record \$49.75 billion first-quarter net loss, reflecting huge unrealized losses on common stock holdings such as Bank of America Corp and Apple Inc during the market meltdown. While quarterly operating profit rose 6 percent, several larger businesses

including the BNSF railroad posted declines, hurt by the negative impact of COVID-19, the illness caused by the novel coronavirus.

Buffett said operating earnings will, through at least this year, be "considerably less" than they would have been had the pandemic not occurred. Berkshire's cash stake ended the quarter at a record \$137.3 billion, though Buffett said "we're willing to do something very big," perhaps a \$30 billion to \$50 billion transaction. But it won't be in US airlines, after Buffett confirmed that Berkshire in April sold its "entire positions" in the four largest: American Airlines Group Inc, Delta Air Lines Inc, Southwest Airlines Co and United Airlines Holdings Inc. Buffett said he "made a mistake" investing in the sector, which the pandemic has changed "in a very major way" with no fault of the airlines, leaving limited upside for investors. "It is basically that we shut off air travel in this country," he said.

The meeting was devoid of the surrounding three-day weekend of dining, shopping and other celebratory events that annually draw tens of thousands of people to Omaha for what Buffett calls "Woodstock for Capitalists."

Abel shares the stage

Abel stood in for longtime Vice Chairman Charlie Munger, 96, who normally joins Buffett to answer shareholder questions. Buffett said Munger was in "fine shape" and "good health," and looked forward to



OMAHA: In this file photo, Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, speaks to the press as he arrives at the 2019 annual shareholders meeting in Omaha, Nebraska. —AFP

attending Berkshire's 2021 annual meeting.

Vice Chairman Ajit Jain, 68, who oversees Berkshire's insurance businesses and is also considered a possible CEO candidate, was also absent from the meeting. Abel lives closer to Omaha than Munger and Jain. Berkshire has said its board of directors knows who would become CEO if Buffett died or became incapacitated. Buffett's eldest son Howard would likely become non-executive chairman, and portfolio managers Todd Combs and Ted Weschler could succeed Buffett as chief investment officer. —Reuters

Business

Oil-hungry Asian nations pounce on low prices to build stockpiles

China has biggest strategic oil reserves in Asia-Pacific

SINGAPORE: Some oil-hungry Asian nations are taking advantage of the collapse in prices caused by the coronavirus pandemic to build up their crude stockpiles. Here are some questions and answers about strategic reserves and the region's oil supplies:

What are strategic oil reserves and why do countries need them?

Strategic reserves are stockpiles of oil and other fuels held by governments in secure storage facilities to cover unexpected disruptions to energy supplies. Major economies such as the US, China and Russia began to build up reserves after oil shocks in the 1970s, according to Ravi Krishnaswamy, regional senior vice president for energy and environment at consultancy Frost & Sullivan.

The events that spurred them to take action were principally the 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and the Arab nations, and the 1979 Iranian revolution, which fuelled worries about supplies.

How big are the strategic reserves across the region?

China is believed to have the biggest in the Asia-Pacific. Beijing does not give an official estimate but analysts say it is at around 550 million barrels. In comparison, the United States' strategic reserves currently hold around 630 million. State-owned China National Petroleum Corporation said recently that the country's reserves were "obviously insufficient, and have not yet reached the international standard '90-day safety line'".

The International Energy Agency requires its members to hold emergency oil stocks equivalent to at least 90 days of net oil imports. China is an associate member, but not a full member.

Japan's oil reserves were around 500 million barrels at the end of February, equivalent to national consumption for more than seven months, according to the latest official data, while South Korea had around 96 million barrels in strategic reserves as of December

2019, enough for 89 days.

India, by contrast, has reserves with storage capacity of approximately 40 million barrels—which would last just 10 days in the country of 1.3 billion people.

How are reserves stored?

Strategic reserves are stored largely in secure underground depots like natural rock caverns. The US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, the world's largest supply of emergency crude, is stored in huge underground salt caverns along the Gulf Coast. But building underground storage is challenging as it needs to have the right geological formation, and countries also need to build infrastructure to pump oil in and out. The high cost of building reserves has stopped many countries developing them to sufficient levels.

In Asia, India uses caverns to store its reserves but other countries, such as Japan, put theirs in above-ground tanks.

Which Asian countries are pouncing on low prices to build up stockpiles?

Australia, which has long had one of the lowest levels of emergency stockpiles in the developed world, said it will take advantage of the fall in prices to develop a strategic reserve in the United States.

The country's own storage capacity is already full but it has an agreement with the US allowing it to lease space in its Strategic Petroleum Reserve. In China, the Shanghai International Energy Exchange last month gave approval for state-owned Sinopec Petroleum Reserve to add more storage capacity.

One storage depot in southern Guangdong province can hold up to 600,000 cubic meters (3.8 million barrels), while another in northern Hebei province can hold up to one million cubic meters. India's Ministry of Petroleum tweeted on April 15 it was buying crude to fill its reserves, stored in rock caverns, "to their full capacity".

Madhu Nainan, editor of industry publication



SINGAPORE: A vessel is docked opposite the Marina Pier on Saturday. —AFP

PetroWatch, however, questioned whether the country had enough available storage space to build up capacity quickly. "In India, storage tanks and pipelines are full and dealers' tanks are full," he said. Japan and South Korea, with ample stockpiles, have not announced plans to build up their reserves substantially. A Japanese trade ministry official said current levels were sufficient, while Seoul plans to increase stockpiles by less than one percent this year.

Could low prices boost the region's economies when lockdowns are lifted?

It looks unlikely, in the short term at least. Many observers believe economic activity won't bounce back quickly with the gradual lifting of lockdowns but

only when a vaccine for the virus is discovered—which could be some time away.

"Low oil prices won't turbocharge Asian economic recovery," Jeffrey Halley, OANDA senior market analyst, said.

Are there any winners from low prices?

Major oil-importers in Asia—such as China, Japan and South Korea—would in usual times benefit from low prices but this is unlikely to be the case immediately given the economic devastation caused by the pandemic. In Japan, for example, "the price crash has hit financial markets hard, which is negatively affecting the Japanese economy", said Toshihiro Nagahama, an economist at Dai-ichi Life Research Institute. —AFP



Australia seeks to build its reserve now

Las Vegas torn by virus as casinos clamor to reopen

LAS VEGAS: A smattering of cars drove past the eerily quiet hotels and casinos, shuttered since mid-March, while a handful of tourists gathered by the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign to take photos. But beneath the quiet of the world-famous Strip, Sin City is in turmoil.

A tug of war has emerged between the need for safety during the coronavirus pandemic and the survival of the gambling capital's tourism industry, which some casino operators fear will never be the same. Nevada's Culinary Union Local 226, which represents some 60,000 casino and hotel workers, has had 98 percent of its members laid off, according to secretary-treasurer Geoconda Arguello-Kline.

At least 12 union members have died from the COVID-19 outbreak, out of Nevada's total death toll of 243.

Arguello-Kline said the union fully supports Nevada Governor Steve Sisolak's decision to extend the lockdown until at least May 15.

"He is doing what he can to protect us," she told AFP. "I know it is tough for people, but if you lose your life, you have lost what is most important."

But the length of time of the shutdown—and whether it was even necessary—has triggered heated debate in Las Vegas. Mayor Carolyn Goodman has called the shutdown "insanity," and has pleaded for the city to be reopened. Last month, Goodman faced some national backlash after a controversial television interview with CNN anchor Anderson Cooper.

In a statement released last week, Goodman—who still enjoys support among many Las Vegas residents eager to get back to work—emphasized the need to reopen in the "safest" way. "Las Vegas is in a unique economic crisis," she wrote.

'A way to adapt'

Key to the debate is how Las Vegas casinos could safely reopen

their doors if the restrictions were lifted. Inventors have touted Plexiglas barriers at blackjack tables and other card tables, which would separate the dealer and each player.

Some resorts have rolled out thermo-imaging plans to check patrons' temperatures at a casino entry. —AFP

Lufthansa to get aid from Austria, Switzerland

FRANKFURT/ZURICH/VIENNA: Switzerland and Austria pledged to help Lufthansa with state-backed loans as the German airline pursues talks with Berlin over a 9 billion euro (\$9.8 billion) rescue package.

The Swiss government said on Wednesday it will ask parliament for 1.275 billion francs in loan guarantees for Lufthansa units Swiss and Edelweiss. Strict travel restrictions to contain the coronavirus pandemic have brought flights to a near-halt across the world and there is no end in sight for when they can restart, leaving many

airlines begging governments for rescue packages.

The International Air Transport Association said this month estimated that revenue losses from the coronavirus pandemic have risen to \$314 billion. Lufthansa's Austrian airline AUA said on Tuesday that it had applied for 767 million euros in state aid, of which a large part should be repayable loans and the remainder grants. An AUA spokesman said these grants were still under negotiation and both Switzerland and Austria attached conditions on their participation in the bailout.

"The funds guaranteed by the Swiss government are only to be used for Swiss infrastructure," the government said, adding that the loans would be secured by shares in Swiss and Edelweiss. —Reuters

United States. With some optimism that the virus is peaking, 22 states, accounting for 38 percent of gross domestic product, may be open within the next 10 days, according to a tally by Fundstrat.

"If you see a number of cases for a particular state that has opened up early starting to increase... that is going to be a worrisome sign," said Robert Pavlik, chief investment strategist at SlateStone Wealth.

"Because then this progress that we have made starts to get halted and... the market becomes more nervous that this is going to be a more protracted, slower restart." Investors are eager to look forward after the devastation the shutdowns have already wrought. Data this week showed the US economy contracted in the first quarter at its sharpest pace since the Great

Recession. Another measure of the fallout will come next Friday, when the US government releases the country's employment report for April. The US economy is expected to have shed 20 million jobs for the month, according to a Reuters poll. As states allow certain businesses and activities to resume, investors are seeking to determine if an eventual recovery will be "V-shaped" or one that is more drawn out.

A study by Goldman Sachs found that initial reopening timelines in other countries have often proven "too optimistic" and recovery is quicker in manufacturing and construction than in consumer services.

One state in focus is Georgia, which lifted a ban on eating in restaurants this week. Texas and Florida, two of the most populous US states, also announced plans to

start reopening imminently. Investors will also keep a close eye on reopenings in Germany, Europe's largest economy, as well as other countries.

In China, for example, "simply opening has not necessarily resulted in a return of consumer buying," said Rick Meckler, partner at Cherry Lane Investments in New Vernon, New Jersey. That issue is particularly important in the United States, where consumer spending accounts for more than two-thirds of economic activity. The metrics investors will be looking at include state-level information on unemployment claims or less-conventional data, such as online restaurant reservations, according to Mona Mahajan, US investment strategist at Allianz Global Investors. —Reuters

Austrian GDP to shrink 8% this year: CB

VIENNA: Austria's central bank expects economic output to shrink more than twice as much this year as it forecast just a month ago as the coronavirus lockdown lasts longer than anticipated, its Governor Robert Holzmann said in remarks published on Saturday.

Holzmann said the central bank now forecasts an 8 percent drop in Austria's gross domestic product (GDP). It had previously foreseen a 3.2 percent drop in a "moderate" pandemic scenario, estimating that each week of lockdown cuts annual GDP by more than \$2 billion.

Although Austria's conservative-led government has said it was one of the fastest countries in Europe in reacting to the coronavirus threat, putting its lockdown in place seven weeks ago and being one of the first to start loosening it on April 14, Holzmann said the central bank still had to increase its estimate of the fallout. "This (earlier) forecast was based on the then mild scenario of a five-week lockdown and a five-week step-by-step reopening phase. The conditions have changed in the meantime," Holzmann told the Salzburger Nachrichten newspaper.

"Our current scenario predicts - assuming a 13-week lockdown and a 10-week loosening phase - a fall of eight percent in economic growth," Holzmann was quoted saying. "We hope that the truth will be somewhere between these two scenarios and that the lockdown and the loosening phase will go by more quickly," he added. If those phases are shorter, the economic impact will be smaller, he said. It was not clear what the central bank considers the start and end of the lockdown - in the past it has appeared to use an earlier start date than when the bulk of the restrictions took effect around March 16.

Illustrating the uncertainty in forecasting the pandemic's impact, economic think-tank Wifo, which compiles GDP data for the government, said last week GDP would fall 5.2 percent this year but added it could also fall around 7.5 percent in a more pessimistic scenario. Austria's coalition government of conservatives and Greens has announced an emergency aid package of up to 38 billion euros (\$41.7 billion) to keep companies and the economy afloat while limiting the increase in unemployment.

It is now putting together an investment package to boost growth that would bring forward existing plans for tax cuts for low and middle incomes as well as spending on as-yet unspecified environmental measures. "One should accelerate what was already planned," Holzmann said when asked about the stimulus plan. "That concerns measures relating to climate policy, alternative energy providers, public transport. One should push digitization much harder." —Reuters



In this file photo, the Wynn Las Vegas shows guest rooms illuminated to spell out "Hope Shines Bright" as the resort remains closed, in Las Vegas, Nevada. —AFP

MUNICH: A technician of the German airline Lufthansa works at a parked plane at the "Franz-Josef-Strauss" airport in Munich, southern Germany as public life across the world has been limited in measures to combat the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. —AFP



MUNICH: A technician of the German airline Lufthansa works at a parked plane at the "Franz-Josef-Strauss" airport in Munich, southern Germany as public life across the world has been limited in measures to combat the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. —AFP

Business

India lockdown curbs buffalo meat exports, hitting Ramadan supplies

India shipped close to 1.5 million tons of beef in 2019

KUALA LUMPUR/MUMBAI: For more than a decade Kuala Lumpur street vendor Abu Zahrim Ismail has seen brisk sales of daging dendeng, a spicy buffalo meat jerky, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. But this year, the spread of coronavirus pandemic has slashed shipments of Indian buffalo meat, driving prices higher and hitting sales.

Most meat processing plants in India, the world's second largest beef exporter and Malaysia's top supplier, have been shut as the South Asian nation fights to contain the pandemic.

"The virus has really turned everything upside down," Abu said. India typically sells more than 100,000 tons of buffalo meat every month, but in March exports dropped to around 40,000 tons,

month during the Ramadan festival, which usually accounts for up to 20 percent of the country's annual consumption as families gather to breakfast.

"Typically, Malaysians would consume about 350 containers of buffalo meat a month from India, now it has fallen to half," said one importer based in Kuala Lumpur. Diminished retail demand during Malaysia's own lockdown has also hit overall meat import demand.

"We are only open for takeaway during the movement control order. Sales have dropped about 80 percent," said Indian Muslim Restaurant Operators Association (Presma) president Ayub Khan.

Global meat mess

In 2019, India shipped close to 1.5 million tons of beef, which is sourced largely from dairy buffalos, compared with 2.3 million tons sold by top supplier Brazil, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

The absence of those supplies is being acutely felt in Malaysia, which relies on India for 70 percent of beef imports, as well as in Indonesia where a quarter of imports come from India and buffalo is popular among lower income groups due to its low cost. Indonesian buyers - which were expected to buy 170,000 tons of Indian beef this year before virus-led delays kicked in - are trying to switch to other origins like Brazil and Argentina, industry sources in Jakarta said. But the global Covid 19 pandemic has made replacing those lost supplies difficult, especially after the world's biggest meat companies, including Smithfield Foods Inc, Cargill Inc, JBS USA and Tyson, halted operations at about 20 slaughterhouses and processing plants in North America after workers fell ill.

Number one beef exporter Brazil has also been hit, with meat processor BRF registering 18 COVID-19 cases in late April at an industrial hub that employs about 3,100 people.



Most meat processing plants in India, the world's second largest beef exporter and Malaysia's top supplier, have been shut as the South Asian nation fights to contain the pandemic.

Restrained reboot

Indian meat processors are keen to restart plants once restrictions are eased, but enduring social distancing measures mean it will not be easy to source animals in the usual way. Dairy cattle in India are sent for slaughter after they have passed their productive prime, with agents from meat plants typically going house-to-house to buy up animals that are then trucked to abattoirs.

Animal markets - banned or greatly restricted in scale under lockdown - are also a key source.

"Questions remain over how quickly raw material can be procured and processed following all rules of

social distancing," an official at All India Meat & Livestock Exporters Association, told Reuters. Exporters, importers and association officials were not willing to be named because of the sensitivity over food supplies.

The net effect of disrupted supplies from India will mean lower overall meat imports into cost-sensitive markets around Asia, said J.Y. Chow, food and agriculture expert at Mizuho Bank in Singapore. "The supply is getting disrupted, so any substitute will need to be sourced from an upgrade, and it will thus erode volume demand. No other country sells buffalo meat in the volumes that India does." — Reuters



India second largest meat exporter

according to two exporters. Sales are likely to have been even lower in April as widespread lockdowns took effect, and even in May are expected to remain well below normal despite some parts of the Indian economy re-opening, they added.

"Right now things are not going in favor of our industry. Even though it is food, it is not considered essential as it is for exports," said one of the exporters who is based in northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

"As of now all the exporters are trying to move their current stocks that they are holding." Wholesale prices of frozen buffalo meat in Malaysia have climbed 15 percent-20 percent from a year ago this



MADRID: In Madrid's deserted streets with paying customers scarce, taxi drivers running doctors from house-to-house or taking the sick to hospital have become an essential service, their free rides helping frontline medics fight the virus.

How Spain's free taxis helped battle the virus

MADRID: In Madrid's deserted streets with paying customers scarce, taxi drivers running doctors from house-to-house or taking the sick to hospital have become an essential service, their free rides helping frontline medics fight the virus. Although their role has been largely anonymous, healthcare staff say it has been essential as Spain has battled the worst of an epidemic that has killed close to 25,000 people.

In Madrid, by far the worst-hit area, more than 500 taxi drivers signed up to volunteer through the PideTaxi app, and they have run more than 100,000 free trips.

"I work on the days when I can, then if they need any help and I'm the closest, the app pings and off I go," says Gaby Saez, 45, who has spent the past six weeks behind the wheel since Spain imposed a strict national lockdown on March 14. Despite the risks, he says he's not afraid, just ultra-careful, wearing a mask and gloves and scrupulously disinfecting his taxi after every single trip.

"At times like these, we all have to do our bit, even if what we can do is very limited."

Anonymous but important role

With taxi services made freely available to staff at 266 medical centers across the region, medics have been able to visit patients at home, easing pressure on primary healthcare services. "Health centers request a taxi so they can make home visits to the elderly, to those needing treatment or people with COVID," says PideTaxi president Andres Veiga.

The idea was to reduce the number of people going to health centers to stop them picking up the virus or passing on the infection to medical staff. "A taxi might do 10 or 20 visits a day with healthcare staff. Instead of patients going into the health centers, the doctors or nurses go to see them," he told AFP.

"Being able to take a taxi has made a big difference in stopping the spread of the virus, helping contain it and preventing medical staff from becoming infected." EU health chiefs at the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control say measures to prevent transmission in healthcare facilities "are an immediate priority". This is

particularly true in Spain which has suffered more than 215,000 cases, around 19 percent involving healthcare workers, one of the highest reported percentages in the world.

'Absolutely essential'

Although epidemic peaked earlier this month, medics say the free taxis have made a huge difference. "For me, it's been absolutely essential," says Sara del Carmen Vicente, a 23-year-old nurse at Madrid's October 12 hospital. "They take you to people's homes, they wait outside then they take you to the next place. They're 100 percent available, they're always there with a smile and they never give you any grief," she told AFP. "They're always asking how we're doing, how we're coping emotionally, if things are improving and how the patients are doing."

"It's as if they were part of your family." Footage of doctors and nurses hailing the taxis for their work have been widely shared on social media, one showing a driver in tears when staff began clapping as he entered a health center. For Saez, whose wife is also a taxi driver, seeing medical staff break down was tough. "For me, these doctors and nurses are pretty much heroes so you try and calm them and offer some sort of shoulder to cry on," he says.

'Gratitude the greatest reward'

Voluntary work aside, few of Spain's 100,000 drivers are managing to actually work with movement severely restricted and regional authorities capping the number of taxis out every day. "Billing is down between 80 and 90 percent," says Tito Alvarez of Elite Taxi Barcelona. "When you do get the chance to work, you work well because there are hardly any taxis. But you don't cover your costs because you're only working five days a month." Though money is tight, Saez says the worst thing is knowing that five colleagues have died of the virus. "That really touches a nerve," he admits. "But I feel very calm and I wouldn't even consider stopping volunteering or doing things like delivering masks or ventilator valves. Just seeing how grateful these people are is the greatest reward." — AFP

Ireland unveils 6.5bn euro business package

DUBLIN: Ireland will allow firms impacted by the coronavirus crisis to warehouse tax liabilities for 12 months, offering a "lifeline" as part of an additional package of business supports that could reach 6.5 billion euros, the government announced on Saturday.

Commercial rates will also be written off for three months, a 2 billion euro credit guarantee scheme introduced for small and medium sized businesses and Ireland's sovereign wealth fund mandated to invest 2 billion euros directly into bigger firms, Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe said in a statement.

After a lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19, Ireland laid out a roadmap on Friday for a gradual re-opening of the economy that could allow building sites and some retailers to reopen in two weeks, with restaurants following in June, hotels in July and finally pubs in August. The government concentrated its initial 8 billion euro fiscal response on increased jobless payments and wage subsidies for workers, with 1 billion euros of liquidity supports offered to reeling firms.

The much larger package on Saturday also included a 10,000 euro restart grant for micro and small businesses. Ireland's main business lobby, IBEC, welcomed the measures as an important further step in addressing the cash-flow crisis facing many. Highlighting the scale of the economic shock, Donohoe said firms had deferred 800 million euros of tax in



MANCHESTER: An aircraft grounded due to the COVID-19 pandemic, operated by Ryanair, is pictured beyond unused Swissport stairs, on the apron at Manchester Airport in Manchester, north west England. — AFP

March alone and that that figure could reach 2 billion euros by June.

He also hoped the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund's (ISIF) new equity fund would lead to investment far in excess of the 2 billion euros available capital as it will seek to maximize added capital from existing shareholders and new co-investors. While Jobs Minister Heather Humphries said more supports will be needed for sectors that will find the coming months harder than others, Donohoe said the acting government had not yet considered any potential sector-specific cut to VAT rates.

Hotels, restaurants and pubs, which will only be allowed operate at limited capacity when they open, have called for the VAT rate for the hospitality sector to be temporarily cut to 0 percent from 13.5 percent and for state

to help them pay rent. Donohoe said a new government would be required to enact the tax deferral and credit guarantee schemes, the first tangible sign that the political deadlock since an election in February election could directly hurt business if it cannot be broken.

Donohoe's Fine Gael and rival Fianna Fail are trying to find enough support from smaller parties to form a coalition. No new legislation can be passed until a new government is formed and selects the remaining members of the upper house of parliament. "It is very clear to me that there are economic decisions that our country will need relevant to keeping jobs and creating new jobs that in the coming weeks will require the election of a new Taoiseach (prime minister)," he told a news conference. — Reuters

Canada hands reins of CB to crisis-era specialist Macklem

OTTAWA: Canada on Friday tapped Tiff Macklem to take the helm of the Bank of Canada, confident the experienced central banker would help the country through a severe economic slump caused by the coronavirus and crashing oil prices. Macklem, a former senior deputy at the bank, will become Canada's 10th central bank governor on June 3.

He takes over from Stephen Poloz, who introduced the bank's first ever large-scale bond-buying program and slashed interest rates to a decade low of 0.25 percent to alleviate stress in the financial markets caused by the coronavirus outbreak.

Macklem "was one of Canada's leading economic stewards during the 2008 financial crisis, expertise that will serve Canada well as we work to deal with the COVID-19 crisis," Finance Minister Bill Morneau said when he announced the appointment. Macklem, 58, had been seen by some market observers as a major contender for the role, particularly if the economy soured, because of his strong macroeconomics background.

During his first press conference, the bespectacled Macklem said his message to Canadians is that the bank will continue to "provide essential liquidity to the financial system" with the goal to "keep credit flowing," and he cautioned that the economy would not "snap back to normal" as the coronavirus contagion recedes. The other leading candidate was the current senior deputy governor, Carolyn Wilkins, who would have been the first female to hold the job. Morneau

declined to comment on why she was not chosen.

Macklem held the same position as Wilkins under Poloz's predecessor, Mark Carney, and was passed over for the position seven years ago.

The last four governors have been brought from outside the central bank. Macklem is currently dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, a top Canadian business school.

"He has been in a policymaker role before so I think that's a relative positive when we think about the current environment," said Erik Nelson, a currency strategist at Wells Fargo in New York.

When he was at the bank previously with Carney, "he had a hands-on approach to a lot of the policies that were adopted under the last crisis. And many of those have been adopted this time around," said Mark Chandler at RBC Capital Markets. Macklem's appointment was known only when he walked

into a morning news conference with Poloz and Morneau. For Newsmaker:

"It will be interesting to see how his views on monetary policy have changed over the last seven years... We don't know if he is still as concerned about household leverage as he seemed to be when he was senior deputy under Mark Carney," said Andrew Kelvin, chief Canada strategist at TD Securities.

'Solid hands'

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that with Macklem, "the Bank of Canada will be well-positioned to help with the economic response and eventual recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic". Poloz, 64, has rolled out a series of programs to ease credit and has appeared alongside Morneau in recent weeks as the government and the central bank jointly tried to calm markets and restore confidence. Poloz has said rates are now at their "lower bound."

"Tiff Macklem means the Bank, and its role supporting Canadians, is in solid hands," Poloz said. Macklem caused a brief buzz in the markets when he said the central bank has "the possibility of using negative interest rates" in its framework of unconventional monetary tools, but he then added that in the current situation he is "quite comfortable with the effective lower bound where it is". He also praised the "bold" and "unconventional" approach that both the government and the Bank of Canada have taken since coronavirus shut down much of the economy. — Reuters



Tiff Macklem

South Africa's cigarette ban lights up a row

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's decision to extend a ban on cigarette sales has inflamed a row as the country prepared loosening stringent restrictions imposed to contain the spread of coronavirus. The government last month outlawed the sale of alcohol and tobacco products when it imposed the lockdown, considered as one of the strictest in Africa. The country will on May 1 begin a gradual and phased lifting of coronavirus restrictions. President Ramaphosa last week said tobacco sales would be reintroduced starting Friday.

But on Wednesday night, Cooperative Governance Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, rolled back the government's earlier decision. She said after further and wider consultations on the health repercussions of smoking in the face of the respiratory disease, it was decided to uphold the ban. "We ...debated the matter and decided that we must continue as we are when it comes to cigarettes and tobacco products, and (that) we shouldn't open up the sale. "The reasons are health-related," she said.

Tobacco retailers and producers are up in arms. A collective of cigarette producers, the Fair-trade Independent Tobacco Association (FITA), is heading to court. "It's quite baffling ...to us (as) to what changed between the announcement on Thursday evening and the announcement made on Wednesday evening," FITA's chairman Sinenhlanhla Mnguni said. "We are therefore left with no alternative choice ... save to approach the courts for appropriate relief," Mnguni said in an audio note to AFP.

The South African Informal Traders Alliance (SAITA), which represents tens of thousands of informal traders and



JOHANNESBURG: A South African National Defense Force (SANDF) soldier commands a man to wear a face mask in Hillbrow, Johannesburg during a joint patrol by the South African National Defense Force (SANDF). — AFP

hawkers, was "alarmed" at the decision to prolong the ban. "We recognize the health risks associated with the sale of tobacco products, but we must remember that it is not a banned industry, and that we must allow adults to make their own choices," said SAITA's leader Rosheda Muller. "As traders, we are simply providing a service based on a customers' choice. This allows us to feed

our families, educate our children, and sustain jobs," he said in a statement.

The ban has cost the treasury 300-million-rand (US\$16-million) in lost taxes, according to the revenue collection agency SARS. It has also divided cabinet. Finance Minister Tito Mboweni told lawmakers on Thursday that "I didn't like the continuous ban on the sale of alcohol and tobacco, but I lost

the debate and therefore I have to toe the line." Meanwhile more than 400,000 South Africans have signed a petition against the "unfair and spiteful" ban.

Anti-smoking lobbyists have welcomed the ban and called for the toughening of tobacco control regulations. "Health supercedes commercial interests," said Pamela Naidoo of the

Heart & Stroke Foundation. "While the right of the individual is important, when we are facing a crisis ...that poses a danger to society, the rights of the collective to health must take precedence. "We encourage smokers to use this time to stop smoking to improve their health, and to reduce the likelihood of a severe illness should they contract Covid-19." — AFP

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Lifestyle | Features



(From left to right) Iraqi actors Ayad Al-Atabi, Mohammad Qassem, Oussama Mahdi, Kamel Al-Azraqi, and Youssef Al-Hajjaj pose for a group picture on the set of a parody sketch video of Bab al-Hara, an adaptation of an iconic long-running Syrian television drama, in Iraq's southern port city of Basra.—AFP photos



Iraqi actor Mohammad Qassem poses for a picture on the set of a parody sketch video of Bab Al-Hara.



Iraqi actor Youssef Al-Hajjaj poses for a picture on the set of a parody sketch video of Bab Al-Hara.



Iraqi actor Ayad Al-Atabi, (left), gets his makeup done on the set of a parody sketch video of Bab Al-Hara.



Iraqi actor Oussama Mahdi poses for a picture on the set of a parody sketch video of Bab Al-Hara.

Iraqis turn to sketches and songs to contain virus

Bushy moustaches, thick Syrian accents, fistfights in 1930s Damascus and... medical masks? A parody of a popular Syrian television show is raising awareness on curbing the coronavirus outbreak in neighboring Iraq. Artists in Iraq's southern port city of Basra have adapted the beloved characters of "Bab al-Hara" ("The Neighborhood Gate") — a 10-season period drama watched across the Arab world — to convince their compatriots to take the pandemic seriously. In one skit, the show's main character Abu Issam returns to the Syrian capital Damascus unannounced after a long absence, just in time to keep his son from getting into a street fight.



Iraqi actors act out a scene of a parody sketch video adaptation of Bab Al-Hara.

"Put on your mask!" Abu Issam, played by Iraqi artist Mohammad Qassem, scolds his son. When his wife — also played by Qassem — later draws close to welcome him home, Abu Issam slaps her. "Don't you know that hugging and kissing are forbidden? We're in the time of corona(virus)! Disinfect the house!" The scenes are meant to be lighthearted, but the messages behind them are no laughing matter, Qassem told AFP. "We created these skits to raise the public's awareness of what measures the health ministry has asked them to commit to, how to disinfect and clean your hands, and how to abide by the lockdown," he said.

'The world is crazy'

Iraq imposed a nationwide lockdown in mid-March to combat the spread of the virus, but relaxed measures to an evening and weekend curfew last week. People quickly flooded the streets as stores opened across the country, with very few practicing social distancing or wearing masks and gloves. The language of comedy may convince people to take preventative action

against the virus in ways government orders could not, said Youssef Al-Hajjaj, who plays Abu Issam's son in the "Bab al-Hara" parody. "These sketches use comedy to spread information about staying protected when leaving your homes," Hajjaj said.

Pop hits have also been used to persuade Iraqis to stay home, including a remixed music video of a beloved Egyptian hit featuring a police officer at a checkpoint. "Corona's got us under curfew here, the world is crazy and full of fear," he croons. Iraqi singers Wissam Daoud and Thaez Hazem were quick to put out their own tune, a ballad set to the jumpy percussion typical of Iraqi music. "Be careful and don't go out, it'll get easier day by day. That's how you'll stay well and this crisis will go away," they advise.

Iraq has recorded more than 2,000 novel coronavirus cases, including over 90 deaths, although many suspect the real number of cases is much higher as authorities have yet to introduce widespread testing or contact tracing. Basra, where health services are notoriously poor, is witnessing an uptick in infections, with nearly 100 new cases in recent days raising the total to 450. Authorities fear a jump in case numbers could overwhelm Iraq's dilapidated health system — ravaged by decades of conflict and underdeveloped due to little investment and widespread corruption.

'Stay strong'

Qassem and his team have dedicated songs to medical staff and other artists have produced skits to show solidarity with those working long hours at Iraqi hospitals. One video depicts a young female nurse calling her husband from the hospital, tearfully confessing she was exhausted. "Stay strong. It's not any tougher than what we've already been through," he tells her over the phone.

Artistic director Abdullah Khaled, 28, considered it an "artistic responsibility" to support medical staff and spread reliable information about the virus. Another film his team produced features practical tips, including how to disinfect produce and limit outings to one person per household. Khaled's team says these videos, viewed thousands of times on Instagram, would have more of an impact than the government's conventional communications strategy. "Awareness through videos is one of the most important tools we have to persuade people to protect themselves," said the videos' 29-year-old director Mustafa al-Karkhy. "These videos are why people stay safe." — AFP

Free-roaming horse Jenny cheers up German lockdown

Every morning white mare Jenny leaves her stable to stroll through her Frankfurt neighborhood. Bringing trams to a halt and smiles to people's faces, the free-roaming horse is brightening up the coronavirus lockdown for many. "Everyone else has to live with coronavirus restrictions but Jenny is as free as ever," her owner Anna Weischedel, 65, told AFP. For more than a decade Jenny has wandered solo through her local Fechenheim area, a green part of Frankfurt on the bank of the Main river. She explores the high street, trots along the tram line to a nearby field and spends hours nibbling on patches of grass.

The beloved Arabian mare, already a venerable 25 years old, has always been a hit with residents. But never more so than in recent weeks. "People seem to notice her more because they have more time. A lot of passers-by stroke her, maybe because they are missing some human contact," said Anna. Like many countries, Germany has closed schools, playgrounds and many businesses to curb the outbreak. Though it has slowly started easing some lockdown measures, people are encouraged to limit their social interactions and keep their distance. But there are no rules against snuggling with Jenny. "It makes us so happy to see Jenny, we miss her when we don't pass her on our walks," said Gaby Marxen, 61, holding two dogs on a leash.

Johanna, 8, who was also out walking a dog, said: "My brother and I like to pet her." To avoid misunderstandings, since people have in the past called the police to report an unaccompanied horse, Jenny wears a note around her neck that reads: "I haven't run away, I'm just out for a walk." The daily ramble ends at around 4:00 pm, when Anna's 80-year-old husband, Werner, jumps on his e-scooter to find Jenny along her usual route and tell her it's home time. "And then she slowly heads back," said Werner, a retired flower shop owner.



Horse owner Anna Weischedel holds a badge reading "My name is Jenny, I did not break away, I'm just taking a stroll" worn by 25-year-old horse named Jenny during her daily walk in Fechenheim.

'Very patient'

In all her years of ambling, Jenny has never caused trouble and local authorities have embraced their equine celebrity, the couple said. "She's a very patient horse, it takes a lot to stress her out," said Anna. The only thing that upsets Jenny is the noise of fireworks, something she shares with Werner who is haunted by the sounds of bombs dropping on Frankfurt when he was a child during World War II. "Jenny and I spend New Year's Eve cowering together," Werner smiled. Jenny's animal-loving owners, who also have a near-toothless chihuahua and look after more than 100 birds, are taking the coronavirus pandemic in their stride. "We survived the war, we'll survive corona," shrugged Werner.—AFP



25-year-old horse named Jenny stands next to her owners Anna (center) and Werner Weischedel as she is getting ready for her daily walk in Fechenheim near Frankfurt am Main, western Germany.—AFP photos



Jenny crosses the railtracks of the tramway as she takes her daily walk in Fechenheim.



Jenny grazes during her daily walk in Fechenheim.

First giant panda born in Netherlands

Wu Wen, a giant panda loaned to a Dutch zoo by China, has given birth in a first for the Netherlands, Ouwehands animal park announced Saturday. Mating took place in January and the cub, which belongs to Beijing just like the mother and father Xing Ya, was born on May 1. "The mother and her cub are staying in the maternity den and are doing well," the zoo in the central city of Rhenen said in a statement. "This cub was born and conceived naturally," said Ouwehands owner Marcel Boekhoorn. "Male or female? The cub's gender will remain a surprise for the time being," he added. "The keepers are

leaving Wu Wen and her cub alone. When the cub leaves the maternity den after a few months, we will be able to see what the gender is.

"When that happens, the little giant panda will be named," Boekhoorn said. The cub will go to China after four years to join the breeding program. The mother and father were loaned to the Netherlands in 2017 for 15 years. Giant pandas are found only in the wild in China where their habitat is shrinking. However since 2016 they are no longer considered in danger of extinction but remain "vulnerable".—AFP

This handout picture released by the Ouwehands Zoo on Saturday shows a female panda holding her cub in her mouth.—AFP



Lifestyle | Features



Artist Reem Ali Adeeb works in her studio apartment in Los Angeles, California. —AFP photos



Artist Reem Ali Adeeb gestures while pointing out the Netflix production of "Green Eggs and Ham" on which she worked, in her studio apartment in Los Angeles.



Artist Reem Ali Adeeb works in her studio apartment.

Hollywood artist tutors Arabic-speaking kids during pandemic

It was during a phone conversation with her sister back in Qatar that the idea clicked for Hollywood animation artist Reem Ali Adeeb. Like other regions across the world, young children in the Middle East were confined at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but there was not nearly enough original content online in Arabic to keep them entertained, such as fun tutorials and other activities. So Ali Adeeb, a Syrian-born animation artist who works at Warner Bros. Entertainment in Los Angeles, and her sister Sandi, a university lecturer of pharmaceuticals in Qatar, decided to take matters into their own hands.

The pair set up "Susupremo," a YouTube channel designed to help Arabic-speaking kids — and their stressed-out parents — weather the coronavirus lockdowns through basic tutorials on drawing, making origami or simply reading children's books, all in Arabic. "The idea is to create videos to engage the kids," said Ali Adeeb, who at Warner Bros. has worked on children's shows including "Green Eggs and Ham," a Netflix animated series based on the Dr. Seuss classic. "There's tons of content on the web in English for kids but there is not enough original content in Arabic," added the 34-year-old who is now working from home on the second season of the Netflix show. "So the aim

is to make their screen time interactive and inspiring by drawing with them, reading them a story or doing crafts."

Ali Adeeb said her sister's 7-year-old son Omar has even joined in the fun, offering origami tutorials to his peers. "He's been the best. He's done the most among us with three videos recorded already," she said. Ali Adeeb herself is using some of the characters from "Green Eggs and Ham," notably Chickeraffe, a chicken/giraffe hybrid, to draw young viewers into her world. Sandi for her part keeps her young audience focused and allows their imagination to travel by reading them children's books.

"I thought I would read for kids during a time where buying or lending a book is very challenging, especially for some disadvantaged kids in some Arab countries," she told AFP in an email. "I started with a book suitable for children aged 3 to 6 years old and now I am selecting more books that can engage the kids for longer periods," she added.

A new reality

The response, so far, has been overwhelmingly positive with children enthusiastically sharing their drawings via email and parents thankful for the opportunity

to be able to hold work meetings online without being interrupted or just have some time for themselves. In a region often wracked by war, and where children faced a harsh reality even before the pandemic, experts say such tutorials offer kids a reprieve whether in the comfort of their homes or even in refugee camps. "Nowadays, children worldwide are confined in their homes and children in the Middle East are no exception," said Annamaria Laurini, the former head of

UNICEF in Lebanon.

"Suddenly their own world has disappeared — no more school, no more play with their friends and no more human interactions except with their family," she added. "It's a lonely reality that makes it difficult to dream, that confines their imagination to the walls of their room — if they are so lucky to have one." Soha Bsat Boustani, a UNICEF consultant based in Beirut, said the YouTube tutorials are much needed in a region where such material in Arabic for children is lagging in terms of creativity and innovation.

"And so, initiatives like 'Susupremo' can only be seen in a positive light as it gives children a healthy way out of confinement and a sense of normalcy." So far Ali Adeeb, her sister and nephew have produced seven videos and they hope to continue with their project even after the pandemic. "I'm thinking now of teaching kids how to draw popular cartoon characters ... and I'm hoping to open this space for other artists," she said. "I have a friend who is a dancer and I would love for her to teach kids how to dance. 'There's a lot more we can do.'—AFP



Artist Reem Ali Adeeb points to the words "Let's Draw" in Arabic while working in her studio apartment.



In this file photo Ronnie Woods, Mick Jagger, Charlie Watts, and Keith Richards perform onstage as The Rolling Stones bring their 'NO FILTER' Tour at NRG Stadium in Houston, Texas.—AFP

Rolling Stones releases new song 'Living in a Ghost Town'

The Rolling Stones on Thursday released their first new original music since 2012, a single aptly named "Living in a Ghost Town." Frontman Mick Jagger announced the surprise release on Twitter, saying, "The Stones were in the studio recording new material before the lockdown & one song — Living In A Ghost Town — we thought would resonate through the times we're living in." Speaking to Apple Music moments later, Jagger said he and Keith Richards wrote the song over a year ago, but that it was uncannily fitting to current times. "It wasn't written for now, but it was just one of those odd things," he said.

"It was written about being in a place which was full of life but is now bereft of life so to speak... I was just jamming on the guitar and wrote it really quickly in like 10 minutes." Before releasing the moody song heavy on twang, Jagger tweaked some of the lyrics to fit the contemporary moment. "Some of it is not

going to work and some of it was a bit weird and a bit too dark," Jagger said. "So I slightly rewrote it. I didn't have to rewrite very much, to be honest. It's very much how I originally did it." The 76-year-old sings of chaos and destruction and the seemingly infinite loneliness of isolation. "Life was so beautiful / Then we all got locked down," Jagger sings.

"Please let this be over / Stuck in a world without end." Also speaking to Apple Music, Richards said the song was cut in 2019 at a Los Angeles studio and re-worked for release recently. "It's sort of eerie when suddenly it's coming to life," he said, adding that he'd been thinking the pandemic was an appropriate time for release. "Then Mick called me and said the same thing and that great minds think alike." The iconic British rockers have spent much of the past two decades touring, though the coronavirus halted those plans.—AFP

Bolshoi ballet soloists limber up in lockdown

In the middle of their bedroom, Bolshoi ballet dancers Margarita Shrainer and Igor Tsvirko have placed a linoleum mat and a barre. Since the start of the lockdown, the couple, both soloists in the legendary troupe, have largely used their own initiative to keep up their dance skills at home. The Bolshoi held its first online classes only this week, more than a month after lockdown began. Yet Tsvirko and Shrainer still look toned and Tsvirko pulls at his waistband. "I don't think I've got fat, that's the main thing," says the 30-year-old dancer, a leading soloist at the Bolshoi who has performed lead roles in "Ivan the Terrible" and "Nureyev."

Shrainer, a first soloist who has performed major roles in "Coppelia" and "Carmen Suite", massages her leg with a tennis ball and moves into the splits. Together for more than a year, they are living in a studio flat owned by the theatre. The same block is home to several other dancers and it was outside this building that the notorious acid attack on then-artistic director Sergei Filin took place in 2013. Their Zoom class is led by a teacher doing steps in his bedroom to a piano accompaniment. There are leaps and energetic dance routines. At the end, Shrainer sits with her legs stretched out in front of her. "We got some cardio," the 26-year-old says. Afterwards they goof around, Tsvirko performing lifts with Shrainer. "As for dancing as a duo, yes we probably are lucky that we can keep up this form," Shrainer says. The dancers had to find their own ways to create a lockdown routine and find equipment.

'Only stronger'

As lockdown began, "the Bolshoi gave very important and worthwhile advice: keep yourself fit and find a way to do ballet in self-isola-

tion," says Tsvirko. "That's what we performers are doing: finding linoleum, barres." Normally dancers do not train at home so do not have such equipment, Tsvirko says. As they spoke, the theatre brought round rolls of black dance linoleum, a special type with a strong grip. Even their ballet shoes are "wearing out" as they cannot collect new supplies, Tsvirko says. The theatre's general director Vladimir Urin told Kommersant daily in early April that it was unfeasible to hold online classes for the 250-strong troupe.



Lockdown has forced dancers Igor Tsvirko and Margarita Shrainer to use their small flat for ballet practice.—AFP

Tsvirko suggests the management did not initially see how online video conferences could be used. "I think it's primarily due to the fact that some people weren't familiar with technical innovations that exist now," General director Urin has said his "good" scenario is for the theatre to reopen for the new season in September and Tsvirko says he

anticipates such a timeframe. "I doubt anyone will start working before September or anything will open so I've steered myself for such long holidays." Meanwhile both are developing hobbies.

Tsvirko is learning to play the guitar while Shrainer has got into cooking, pilates and learning English. She says she misses the bustle of the theatre: "There's not the usual pace, rhythm, constant rehearsals, meeting colleagues, sitting in the cafeteria." Tsvirko says he misses the anticipation ahead of going on stage. "That atmosphere when you come in and warm up and you talk to your favorite wardrobe masters, your makeup artists — that process of going in, the slight butterflies, that's probably what I miss most." Going back will not be easy, they acknowledge.

"After such a long time of strict precautionary measures, how will men even shake hands? I think everyone will be keeping their distance a bit," predicts Shrainer. Physically there will also be "a tough comeback period for the performers, of regaining strength," she says. Theatre-goers will be changed too, says Tsvirko. "Audiences will definitely observe precautions: probably they'll sit in masks and gloves." Beyond the virus, the economic realities have changed, he adds. "Russia for sure is also in an economic crisis, like the whole world basically, so the question is the cost of tickets." Urin told Kommersant that he fears opening later than September could mean financial disaster due to planned premieres. But the dancers are ultimately optimistic the revered troupe will return with renewed energy. "I hope people won't get weaker over this time but only stronger," says Tsvirko.—AFP

STAR FILMMAKERS DRAW INSPIRATION FROM RUSSIA LOCKDOWN

The coronavirus pandemic might have brought the film industry to a halt but Andrei Konchalovsky, one of Russia's most renowned film and theatre directors, is as busy as ever. He wants to make a documentary about daily life under quarantine, exploring the poetic side of the mundane, and he has invited ordinary Russians to work with him on the project. "All of us have ended up on a desert island and that's the most interesting thing," the 82-year-old told AFP in a video interview. In late March, Konchalovsky issued a call on social media to his fans to make short videos for a project he has called "Quarantine Russian Style".

"Take your smartphones, film your new routines, your favorite spot at home, or even your work web conference. And we'll make movies!" he said. Every week the celebrated filmmaker, who is followed by more than 400,000 people on Facebook, asks his co-creators a number of questions. He wants them to speak about their fears or new rituals or even tell him about the "craziest" thing they have purchased during the lockdown.

Konchalovsky, who has earned multiple international awards and worked with renowned filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, has already received thousands of video clips and photos to choose from. "They shoot them from their room, a decrepit window sill or a favorite old sofa," he said. Sometimes contributors read out a text or wax philosophical about Russians' coping mechanisms.

Scenes have included Russians sharing a vodka bottle at a makeshift table connecting two nearby balconies or riding a bike to a neighbor's door. Konchalovsky, who lived in the United States for many years and whose



Russian director Andrei Konchalovsky

Hollywood movies include "Tango and Cash", also asked aspiring filmmakers to reflect on the nature of the quarantine in Russia and how it may be different from lockdowns in China or Europe. The film director said his countrymen might adapt better to crises than people in the West. "Specifics of life in Russia have fostered in man an enormous ability to resist sanctions," he said. "That is why we will be able to tough it out."

Konchalovsky is not the only filmmaker to have found new inspiration during the lockdown. Director and producer Timur Bekmambetov, who is regarded as one of the inventors of the "Screenlife" format, in which movies take place entirely on computer screens, wants to produce a film about the lockdown in the new genre. Like Konchalovsky, he has invited Russians to contribute short videos and script pitches for a project he has called "Tales From The Quarantine". The crowd-sourced stories could be real or fictional.—AFP

Eiffel Tower caps 'HeroesShineBright' tribute

The Eiffel Tower joined other global landmarks Saturday in capping a sparkling tribute launched by the Empire State Building in New York to those battling the coronavirus. At 8:00 pm (1800 GMT), when people in France have been clapping daily from windows and balconies to thank health-care workers, the Paris landmark lit up in "sparkling white" to hail "the unfailing courage of care workers confronting the coronavirus pandemic," said SETE, the company that manages the Eiffel Tower. A

half hour later, the lights on the 20th century Montparnasse Tower, another tall landmark in the French capital, transitioned from white to red "to show its support even more intensively, like a beating heart," the company added.

The nine-day #HeroesShineBright initiative started on April 24 in New York and each night a different color is used there to salute various groups including health care staff, transit workers, and police or military personnel, SETE added. Other landmarks that have supported the initiative are the Euromast in Rotterdam, 360 Chicago, the UAE'S Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest structure, the CN Tower in Toronto, the Macao Tower in China, the Busan Tower in South Korea, the Ostankino TV Tower in Russia, the Tallinn TV Tower in Estonia and the OVN1 Tower in Slovakia.—AFP



A picture shows a bronze statue wearing a face mask with the Eiffel Tower enlightened in background in Paris.—AFP



Carp, a fish that is found in Iraq's Tigris River, is prepared in the traditional way (masgouf) at a restaurant in Baghdad, ahead of the iftar fast-breaking meal during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan on Saturday. — AFP

Swiss soldiers fight COVID-19 armed with Bluetooth app

CHAMBLON, Switzerland: Swiss army conscripts are taking the fight to the coronavirus pandemic by field-testing a Bluetooth-based smartphone app aimed at stopping a resurgence of COVID-19. The rapidly-created app traces people who have inadvertently crossed paths with someone infected with the virus. It uses wireless technology with each phone registering the others it has come into close proximity with for a sustained period of time.

For the field test, the infantry recruits went through a normal day: physical training, theoretical study and shooting at targets 300 m away. "What we did before was lab tests. Now we're gathering data on how this app performs in real life," Simon Rosch, a software engineer with smartphone app developers Ubiq, told AFP. The military base makes a good testing ground because, unlike civilians, soldiers are still allowed to congregate in numbers in close proximity. Furthermore, they are isolated from the rest of the population inside their barracks at Chamblon, overlooking Lake Neuchâtel in western Switzerland.

If an app user tests positive for the virus, a cod-

ed message is sent to others who might have been exposed to that person, with information as to what they should do next. The aim is to break the chains of transmission and thereby suppress any spread of the virus as lockdown restrictions are gradually lifted. Ubiq, which developed Switzerland's main weather app, started working on the new tool only a few weeks ago.

They then joined forces with experts from the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) university, which had produced similar ideas. EPFL does the security, research and Bluetooth tests while Ubiq builds that knowledge into the app and comes up with the design and user experience. "I'm pretty positive about this becoming operational - and it will help," Rosch said during the test. "It's not a magic solution that can make the problem disappear but it's a good thing that can support us."

Privacy questions

Sitting in a military briefing room armed with a laptop, Alfredo Sanchez went through the first data sets from the field test. A soldier was designated as

if he had tested positive for the virus, and his contacts were then traced. "It's in the evaluation phase. The results will mean we will make some adjustments," said Sanchez, a project manager in the EPFL IT department. "It's an idea that started in Asia using GPS, which is a bit more invasive because it tracks exactly where people were," he told AFP. "This was created to find a solution that is much more respectful of privacy."

Because Bluetooth signal cannot travel far, app users must be close to pick up the digital handshake between devices. It does not matter whereabouts that connection takes place, so no location data is gathered, and the process is anonymous. "We don't have the name of the person or the phone number. The app sends a message saying you were in contact on a certain date with a person who tested positive," said Sanchez.

Switzerland believes it now has the virus under manageable control after more than 1,400 people died in the Alpine nation and 30,000 tested positive. Matthias Egger, the government's COVID-19 scientific task force head, told a press conference in Bern on Friday that two surveys now showed

around 60 percent of the population would use the app - a high level of reach that would make it very effective. Rosch said: "The chances that you detect something get higher the more people have it installed."

A May 11 roll-out date has been floated, to coincide with Switzerland reopening its schools and restaurants. But it is dependent on a government green light - plus tech giants Apple and Google releasing a new software building block that will facilitate such apps. Sanchez said any software compatibility adjustments could then be finished by late May or early June.

For now, the as-yet unnamed app is referred to as the Decentralized Privacy-Preserving Proximity Tracing project - or the more "Star Wars" robot-sounding DP3T for short. The Bluetooth contacts are stored for 14 days on users' phones, rather than on a central server. Soldier Colin Galligani, 20, has the test app on his mobile. "I check my phone regularly to see if I get a message and see if someone is infected," he said after target practice. "With the information that EPFL gathers here, they can work on that so they can apply it to civilians." — AFP

Friends, foes see opening...

Continued from Page 1

donation of 500,000 test kits, while New York Governor Andrew Cuomo thanked Ma and other Chinese businesspeople - as well as Beijing's consulate - for sending 1,000 ventilators. More recently, Chinese provinces donated supplies to the states of Maryland and Utah, with photo-ops showing local US officials holding signs that salute friendship.

Russia gave prominent coverage when it sent a military plane of masks, ventilators and other supplies to New York. Trump, who has sought closer ties with President Vladimir Putin, called the gesture "very nice," although the State Department insisted the goods were purchased, not donated. Virus infections have since jumped inside Russia, and some social media users in both Egypt and Turkey have questioned whether their governments were really in a position to help others.

Turkey has sent aid to some 55 countries. Its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has been hoping to defuse tensions with the United States, especially with Congress over Turkey's purchase of an air defense system from Russia. The aid shipment marks part of an effort to reach out broadly to the United States after Erdogan "put all its eggs in

Trump's basket", said Gonul Tol, director of the Turkey program at the Middle East Institute. "I'm sure there is an understanding in Ankara that this could be Trump's final year," Tol said, while adding: "Turkey's problems with the US are too deep to be resolved by this PR campaign."

The last time the United States received such wide assistance was after Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans in 2005. The then administration of George W Bush also decided largely to accept all aid regardless of politics, although it refused an offer of doctors from Cuba. Cull, the scholar of public diplomacy, said it was striking how little of Washington's own COVID-19 assistance gets noticed by Americans, who are more likely to oppose exporting aid at a time of need.

The State Department says the US government has committed \$775 million in overseas pandemic assistance. But Trump has also vowed to freeze funding for the World Health Organization, which is at the frontlines of the crisis and receives more than \$400 million in US money each year, for alleged bias toward China.

Cull expected that Trump's "America First" approach, coupled with scenes of COVID-19 devastation within the country, would bring lasting damage to the US reputation. "It's like a country with a terrible navy having to fight a naval war. Everybody knows that, for all the wonderful things in the United States, healthcare is a problem." Many people may still admire US products or universities, but "they are certainly not going to admire the American government in the way they have historically." — AFP

the cremation of his father led to disagreement among relatives about whether the urn should be kept at home or interred.

The distant and impersonal process means crematory workers have to help comfort relatives who would normally have mourning rituals like wakes and family gatherings for support. "I tell them to pray. You should pray because that is the vitamins of the dead," said worker Romeo Elevaso. His colleague, Uson, said they apologize to the families for the restrictions and try to lighten the atmosphere with stories and smiles.

Relatives understand the extraordinary nature of the pandemic, and accept that they won't ever see their loved one's faces again, he said. As well as the tough work of consoling relatives, the crematory workers also live with the fear of getting sick themselves. Local authorities have urged them to take the hottest baths they can stand after work and to take vitamins and ginseng, which they claim can boost their immune systems. Elevaso follows that advice and also scrubs his body with rubbing alcohol before returning to his family after every shift. "For us, taking vitamins and saying prayers are important," he said. — AFP

Cremations traumatize...

Continued from Page 1

virus started to take off in March. The Philippines has detected nearly 9,000 infections and officially recorded 603 deaths, though due to a limited testing capacity the numbers are thought to be higher.

Leandro Resurreccion IV, 26, wasn't allowed to visit his father as he was dying from the virus in hospital, and never saw his corpse - just the plastic he was wrapped in. "I think the fact that...my family wasn't able to say goodbye could probably be the second most tragic thing that happened after my dad's death," he said. "It makes the grief slower," he added.

The anonymous process - all the body bags look alike - has even fed doubts that the urn at home contains his father's ashes. To his knowledge, Resurreccion's family had always buried its dead, and

Turkey contact tracers race to...

Continued from Page 1

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca credits the country's contact tracing efforts along with Turks' largely voluntary adherence to lockdown measures, for the trend. In contrast to South Korea, which limited deaths to below 250 with the help of a contact-tracing app, Turkey has taken a more labor-intensive approach. Koca said on Wednesday around 5,800 teams of two or three medics had identified 468,390 people who have been in contact with coronavirus patients. He said around 99 percent of those had been reached and were regularly monitored by health officials.

In the capital Ankara, a coordination center oversees the field visits and follow-up calls by telephone. The two groups cooperate to identify, test and report cases across the city. "Since a household is on average four to five people, with the workplace added in, there have been cases where we tracked 200 people at once," said Ayse Cigdem Simsek, the Ankara Provincial Health Directorate Deputy Chairwoman of Public Health Services. Under the system, the teams are tasked with telling contacts of a COVID-19 sufferer to stay at home for 14 days, even if they do not have symptoms.

Other teams are then instructed to call them daily to ensure compliance and check on their health. If they report symptoms, they get another visit to give a sample for testing in hospital. Kerime Altunay, a public health doctor and coordinator of the remote monitoring team in Ankara, told Reuters. The system grew out of a method Turkey had been using for decades to contain previous outbreaks of measles and flu, Simsek told Reuters.

But while testing was launched on the day the first case was confirmed, March 11, it took a while to roll out. Initially Ankara sent testing kits to the United States when it was short of them at home, but has since ramped up testing. Turkey, with a population of 83 million is now doing 30,000-40,000 tests a day, according to data from the Health Ministry. Schools were closed immediately and other measures, including the closure of non-essential shops and factories and compulsory lockdowns at weekends, were brought in in stages. The lockdown has been stricter than South Korea but less stringent than some European countries like Spain or Italy.

The head of the Turkish Medics Association (TTB), Sinan Adiyaman, said early in the outbreak that not enough tests were being done. The TTB has

also questioned the death toll, as experts have done for other countries, and said it wants the government to include those who died with COVID-19 symptoms even if they have not tested positive. The government says it is following reporting standards set by the World Health Organization (WHO). The TTB was not available for comment.

Irshad Shaikh, acting head of the WHO's Turkey office, told Reuters the recent declining trend in new cases showed Turkey's testing methodology was robust and that the numbers of tests were sufficient. He said contact tracing helped lessen the spread in Turkey by pinpointing the majority of people who came into contact with confirmed cases.

Shaikh said Turkey conducts tests during autopsies on suspected cases who die outside of hospitals, and repeat tests on suspected cases that initially turn up negative, which would make the potential number of errors in reporting deaths very small. Koca said on Wednesday that the coronavirus outbreak was at its peak and would decline, and that contact tracing would continue to ensure it does not reignite.

Mustafa Necmi Ilhan, head of the Public Health Department at Gazi University Medical School, said the initial speed of the outbreak in Turkey, which was similar to the worst affected countries such as Italy, prompted fears, but that contact tracing helped break the chain of infection. Turkey also says its distinctive practice of delaying transfer of patients to intensive care from other wards has helped limit the death toll by easing pressure on intensive care resources, such as medical gear and staff.

Ankara has stressed the early use of high flow oxygen instead of intubation when respiratory difficulties appear, as well as early administration of hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malarial drug, before patients develop more severe symptoms. The government said this had lowered the death rate and shortened recovery times.

Hydroxychloroquine, a decades-old generic medicine, has been touted by US President Donald Trump and others as a "game changer" treatment for the highly contagious respiratory illness, and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized its use in COVID-19 on an emergency basis. But there is not yet scientific proof that it works. There are currently no approved medicines or vaccines specifically for COVID-19.

Last week the US FDA cautioned against the use of hydroxychloroquine in COVID-19 patients, saying it could cause abnormal heart rhythms and dangerously rapid heart rate. Ilhan said the drug was administered carefully, in different doses depending on the age and health of the patient. While it may have side effects, none had appeared so far, he said. — Reuters

Stars

Daily SuDoku

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

hard

Yesterday's Solution

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

very hard

STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)

Today you might find that a long-term dream finally comes true. Perhaps a publication you respect wants to pay you for your writing, photography, or graphic design. Or maybe you realize that a particularly difficult yoga pose or physical you've been attempting that seemed impossible a month ago is now actually achievable! Or perhaps you and your partner may finally be on the same page.

Libra (September 23-October 22)

Some rather depressing information could come your way, Libra, but it might not be as bad as it seems. Check the facts before making drastic decisions based on a partial picture. You may have to wait a few days before you have what you need to act in an informed matter. In the meantime try to put this news out of your head, and do something nice for yourself: take an Epsom salt bath, or watch a performance by one of your favorite stand-up comedians.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Some strange and rather gloomy dreams could come your way tonight, Taurus. They could, if you let them, catapult you into a rather depressed mood during the day. Writing them down might help exorcise these difficult emotions. You could also be a bit depressed over money. This isn't a good day to make investments, start a new business, or open up a savings account. Instead, be thankful for what you have and look for ways to use your resources wisely.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

Gloom over money matters might catch up with you at some point today, Scorpio. A little caution might be in order, especially regarding impulse buying or purchasing luxuries. Today would be a good day to go through your paid subscription services and decide what's truly necessary and what can go.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)

A lack of communication with an unhappy family member could have you feeling a little downhearted, Gemini. You might wonder if you've done something to offend this person. Chances are you haven't. The best way to handle situations like this is to encourage the person to communicate with you. If there's no response, wait a day or so and ask again.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Today you might find yourself feeling a little low, Sagittarius, but it doesn't seem as if there's any real reason for it. You may just have had a bad night and need some extra sleep. Some good news from far away could cheer you up in the afternoon. You might receive an invitation to reconnect with a dear friend.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Professional, creative, or financial advancement could be on your mind today, Cancer. You might try to visualize the next steps and anticipate tasks that take more effort and concentration than you're used to. Don't panic. It's better to not push yourself so hard. Wait a few days until the planets relax a little and just do what you need to do - no more, no less. You'll be successful in the long run.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Old memories, traumas, and phobias from the past could affect your mood today, Capricorn. You might feel depressed without really knowing why. An event in your life has brought these feelings near the surface without revealing the source. If you've had any disturbing dreams or visions lately, write them down. They might offer a clue as to what's bothering you.

Leo (July 23-August 22)

You might decide to spend a large part of the day working on a project that requires a lot of mental energy. Plans to spend some time with either a close friend or lover might not turn out to be quite what you'd hoped, Leo. Your friend could be in a rather gloomy mood. A relaxing evening, perhaps streaming a concert or funny movie, can release tension and melt grumpy moods into relaxed and silly ones. Enjoy!

Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

A friend might be feeling a little depressed today and need some cheering up. First: listen to what's bothering them without minimizing their feelings or lecturing them on how to fix it. Acknowledge their feelings as valid, and then see if together you can come up with a plan of action for helping them to feel better. Sometimes all a person needs is contact with someone who loves them and a good laugh.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)

A friend who is in a gloomy state of mind may reach out to you today, Virgo, and likely need some cheering up. Do the best you can: actively listen and lend them your compassion. Once they've opened up to you, you two may find that playing a game together online or taking a virtual tour of a museum you've always wanted to go to together are great ways to lift your spirits.

Pisces (February 19-March 20)

Pivotal career matters may need to be thought through today, Pisces. A lot could be at stake at work or in your home in the coming weeks. Whatever tasks you need to tend to could require a lot of effort and concentration. There's a danger of sinking into a gloomy mood over it, but try to avoid this trap. You'll probably accomplish whatever it is you're hoping to do, so hang on to that thought.

Find the way



Join the dots



Crossword

Memorial Day
Last Monday in May

S	M	N	S	C	O	M	M	E	M	O	R	A	T	E	R	B
S	A	A	E	J	W	P	L	A	I	R	O	M	E	M	S	E
B	B	C	O	A	C	E	R	E	M	O	N	Y	I	H	N	N
Q	O	I	R	N	T	Y	A	D	I	L	O	H	R	O	A	P
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A	F	S	D	F	T	E	F	S	I	S	V	E	V	A	R	O
P	E	G	M	D	M	N	G	D	V	A	E	T	U	L	A	S
H	Q	A	F	E	C	N	A	V	R	E	S	B	O	T	J	L
X	S	L	R	I	F	D	Z	G	E	A	K	Q	R	J	S	I
T	X	F	Z	P	L	B	Q	H	S	N	V	G	K	L	O	V

AMERICAN ANTHEM CEMETERY CEREMONY COMMEMORATE DECORATION FALLEN FLAGS FLOWERS

FREEDOM GRAVE HALF MAST HEROES HOLIDAY HONOR MAY MEMORIAL OBSERVANCE

PATRIOTIC REMEMBRANCE SACRIFICE SALUTE SERVICE SOLDIERS TAPS VETERANS WAR

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Sports

Photo of the day



MELBOURNE: Julian Wilson Project at Urban Surf Wavepark in Melbourne, Australia. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Khawaja vows to bounce back after contract snub

SYDNEY: Usman Khawaja believes he is still among Australia's top six batsmen and can force his way back into the squad after being dropped a few days ago from the list of contracted players.

The top order batsman was omitted from Australia's annual list of 20 elite, contracted players in 2020, announced on Thursday, after falling out of favour with selectors midway through last year's Ashes.

"Without sounding arrogant, I still feel like I'm one of the top six batsmen in the country," the 33-year-old lefthander told Fox Sports yesterday. "If you're performing, you're performing; it's not like I'm 37 or 38 and coming into right at the end of my career," said the batsman who played the last of his 44 tests against England in Leeds last August.

There are whispers about Khawaja's vulnerability against spin bowling but the Islamabad-born player said he second only to Steve Smith played when it came to negotiating the slow bowlers.

"My playing against spin has been right up there as some of the best in the county. Bar maybe Steve Smith, who is an absolute genius," he said. "But the most important thing is to score runs."

Former Australia captain Allan Border has termed Khawaja's omission from the list of contracted players "strange", while former test player Mark Waugh expects the batsman to force his way back into the squad. —Reuters

England's Roy desperate to return to cricket, even behind closed doors

'I'm shadow-batting in the mirror, I'm looking pretty good'

LONDON: England opener Jason Roy is desperate to get back to playing cricket, even if matches have to take place behind closed doors due to the coronavirus pandemic. Roy, who was part of England's World-Cup winning team last year, had a taste of playing in an empty stadium in the Pakistan Super League (PSL) earlier this year and said it was a bizarre experience.

"No atmosphere," said the 29-year-old. "Simple as that to be honest. It was a very strange feeling."

"You're used to, as a batsman, with the bowler running in, it being relatively quiet. You learn to block out the crowd but then as soon as that ball's done you hear the crowd going absolutely berserk and over there when that was the case it was dead silence, it was the strangest thing."

The PSL, a Twenty20 competition, closed its doors to spectators in March before suspending the competition days later due to coronavirus. Despite that experience, Roy, a destructive opening batsman, wants to get back to playing, with the start of the English season delayed until July 1 at the earliest.

"I'm more than happy to play behind closed doors," he said. "I think it would be nice just to get out there." The Surrey player said the British government's lockdown meant he was severely limited in his ability to practise.

"I'm shadow-batting in the mirror, I'm looking

pretty good," he joked. "So that's all I can do, to be honest, hitting a tennis ball against my wall here at home, going a bit stir crazy."

Roy said the ongoing disruption meant it could make sense to postpone the T20 World Cup, scheduled for Australia in October, but he said the players would make sure they were ready if it went ahead.

He said he was happy to start playing again when asked to by his bosses because he trusted their judgement, describing himself as a "pawn in the sporting world". Roy was asked about comments made by Barcelona footballer Ivan Rakitic, who told the Spanish press he was ready to take the risk of returning to action despite the virus.

Roy said: "If an individual wants to go onto the front line and put himself at risk then good on him but if someone doesn't want to, then I don't think they should be ashamed of it either."

"Whatever's right in that situation. If the country desperately needs us to play cricket to make themselves feel better... but I'm not sure that's the case." Meanwhile, the Daily Telegraph reported that England could begin their rescheduled three-Test series against the West Indies on July 8.

The series was originally due to start on June 4 at the Oval. However, the spread of the coronavirus scuppered the plans. England captain Joe Root and his West Indies counterpart Jason



LONDON: File photo taken on July 14, 2019 England's Jason Roy plays a shot during the 2019 Cricket World Cup final between England and New Zealand. Roy is desperate to get back to playing cricket, even if matches have to take place behind closed doors due to the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

Holder have now been involved in talks over the rescheduling.

"Positive ongoing discussions with the ECB and CWI continued on Friday," a spokesperson for the England and Wales Cricket Board said. "Both boards were represented including captains, coaches, administrators and the chief med-

ical officers from the respective boards.

"Discussions were wide-ranging including dialogue around revised schedules and COVID-19 medical and biosecurity planning."

"Meetings will be ongoing over the next few months to reach an outcome of when international cricket could potentially return." —AFP

Snell, Giolito advance to MLB The Show final

TEXAS: The best player since the start of the MLB The Show Players League is onto the championship series. Stunningly, the same cannot be said of the second-best player. Tampa Bay Rays pitcher Blake Snell and Texas Rangers slugger Joey Gallo, the only two players to record at least 23 regular-season wins, were both in action Saturday as the playoff weekend continued in the tournament.

Snell, who had a league-best 24-5 record in the regular season, advanced to yesterday's championship series, coming from behind to top New York Mets infielder Jeff McNeil two games to one in the semifinals. He will face Chicago White Sox starting pitcher Lucas Giolito, who topped Cubs utility man Ian Happ in three games in an all-Windy City semifinal on the other side of the bracket.

First pitch for the best-of-five championship series is set for today at 2:30 p.m. ET on ESPN. As for Saturday, the most

stunning results came in the first sets of games. Gallo, who finished the regular season 23-6, opened play Saturday with a 3-2 win over Happ but dropped the next two games, 4-3 and then a 7-0 blowout in the deciding game.

It was a similar story for a player tied for the third-best record in the regular season (21-8), as budding Toronto Blue Jays star Bo Bichette hung with Giolito in three tight contests. But after losing the opener 3-2 and winning 1-0 with a run in the third inning in Game 2, Bichette dropped the rubber match. Giolito rode a Nomar Mazara three-run home run to a 5-3 win in the deciding game and a berth in the semis.

In the all-Chicago semifinal, Giolito opened with an 8-4 win. Happ took Game 2 by a 1-0 score, but Giolito — who said he had played very little of MLB The Show 20 prior to this event — booked his spot in the championship with a 3-1 win in the third game.

The highlight of the final game was an insurance home run by White Sox outfielder Luis Robert, one of the most-hyped prospects in baseball who has yet to make his MLB debut.

"That's his first homer," Giolito said of the 22-year-old Robert. "That's his first career homer right there." "I'm so glad you

hit it right now," Happ quipped back.

"It's crazy," Giolito told MLB.com about advancing to the final. "I never thought I would be playing video games on ESPN. I've always been a big video game fan, and whenever I would turn to ESPN and see esports, I would think, 'Oh that's pretty cool,' and now it's crazy that I'm actually doing it."

In the other semifinal, McNeil took on Snell in a matchup of Friday's quarterfinal winners.

McNeil took Game 1 from Snell 4-1 and appeared poised to take the series with Noah Syndergaard on the mound in Game 2. But the tall right-hander — who in real life is out at least all of 2020 after undergoing Tommy John surgery — took a line drive off the head early in the game and had to exit.

It was all Rays from there, as Snell took the game 8-0 and then used home runs from Hunter Renfroe and Willy Adames to win 7-0 in Game 3 and take the series.

"I just stopped talking," Snell said afterward on the FS1 broadcast of the difference between the first game the next two. "That was my key. Don't talk and just focus on the game. As I did that, I started squaring it up and was on it more often and was able to put good swings on the ball." —Reuters

England's S Lanka tour rescheduled

LONDON: England's two-match test series in Sri Lanka, which has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has been rescheduled for January next year, Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) CEO Ashley de Silva has said.

England were scheduled to play tests in Galle and Colombo in March before the coronavirus outbreak shut down sport worldwide as countries introduced lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

"We are in the process of rescheduling the tours that have been postponed," De Silva told Sri Lankan newspaper Daily News. "England has been already rescheduled for the month of January next year but

the dates have not been finalised.

"At the same time we are also looking at exploring the possibility of rescheduling postponed tours and looking at the windows which are available and alternatives too. "South Africa is one of the tours which we are looking at rescheduling. We are engaged in discussions with the member countries and see how it can be planned out."

South Africa's limited-overs tour of Sri Lanka — three one-day internationals and three Twenty20 games — was scheduled to take place in June before it was postponed. "There are also two other tours which are scheduled to take place with India and Bangladesh due to tour Sri Lanka in June-July and July-August respectively," De Silva added.

"We will explore the possibility of playing those two tours in another week or two." — Reuters

Sports

MGM pitches plan for NBA to finish season in Vegas: Report

Teams worried about coronavirus affecting older staff

LOS ANGELES: MGM Resorts International has pitched a proposal to the NBA to complete the coronavirus-halted 2019-20 season on courts in Las Vegas convention centers, the New York Times reported.

The plan, according to the newspaper, would have players and their families, plus other essential personnel, stay in a quarantined area in MGM hotels along the Las Vegas Strip while practicing and competing on courts in the same facilities.

Players and broadcasters would have access to the usual resort facilities while in the protected area under the plan by MGM, which has 13 Vegas resort properties. The plan would convert MGM convention centers into 24 basketball courts, five of them equipped with cameras to permit television coverage, and players would reside in connected or nearby hotels.

ESPN has reported the NBA is looking at a similar quarantined area in Orlando involving hotels and courts in private Disney World areas. The NBA halted its season in March after Utah's Rudy Gobert tested positive for the deadly virus and the league has announced no plan for resuming games or even a timetable for returning to competition.

The league will allow players to conduct individual workouts at team facilities starting Friday in areas where stay-at-home laws allow, the first small step toward resumption. No plan among those floated in US media has included spectators at games, most focusing on a one-site bubble where players might live and play and only once coronavirus tests are available in sufficient numbers to the public and the NBA has enough tests for everyone involved.

The Mandalay Bay resort, with 4,700 rooms available over three connected hotels, would be the central hub of the MGM Vegas plan. An enclosed walkway would connect the Luxor, where caterers and housekeepers would reside.

The Las Vegas Aces of the Women's NBA play at Mandalay Bay. In such a plan, players are expected to need a training camp of more than three weeks to prepare for games, which could include the final month of the regular season and two months of play-off contests.

Meanwhile, the NBA will have to decide who is considered essential game staff should play resume amid the coronavirus pandemic, ESPN reported. One of the concerns weighing on NBA teams is the age of people typically deemed essential to a team, such as a member of the coaching staff or a general manager, or whether they have a pre-existing medical condition.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has identified people 65 or older or people of any age with an underlying medical condition as being more susceptible to COVID-19.

"Based on all the information that we have today, probably people over 60 with preexisting conditions can't go, for sure, no matter what their titles are," one unidentified general manager told ESPN. "Whether it's a father of the star player or whether it's the general manager of the team, they can't go there." Currently, there are six NBA head coaches who are 60 and older, with three 65 and older: Alvin Gentry, New Orleans Pelicans, 65; Mike D'Antoni, Houston Rockets, 68; and Gregg Popovich, San Antonio Spurs, 71.



NEW YORK: File photo taken on March 11, 2020 an NBA logo is shown at the 5th Avenue NBA store in New York City. The NBA informed clubs that it plans to allow individual workouts by players at team facilities no sooner than May 8 in areas where allowed by government regulations. —AFP

Who will be determined essential will lead to tough choices and the potential for hurt feelings, but general managers told ESPN medical staff likely won't be cut. "The one area you don't want to skip on is the medical. The coaching part of it, you could

probably get by with a head coach, that's it," one general manager said.

As of Saturday, nearly 1.1 million people in the United States had been diagnosed with the coronavirus, with 64,283 deaths. —Agencies



Staff likely won't be cut

FIFA requests to continue Blatter probe

GENEVA: FIFA has asked Switzerland's Office of the Attorney General (OAG) to maintain its investigation into former president Sepp Blatter, football's global governing body said on Saturday.

French newspaper Le Monde and German daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung claimed earlier this month the disgraced 84-year-old will not be prosecuted over a charge relating to TV rights sold to the Caribbean Football Union (CFU).

That was one of two criminal cases opened against Blatter in 2015 for "suspicion of unfair management and breach of trust". "We have filed official submissions with the OAG arguing strongly that the investigation be

continued," FIFA said.

"Indeed, FIFA will consider all legal options to ensure that the relevant people are held to account," it added, confirming the media reports. On Wednesday, AFP obtained a police report showing suspicions of impropriety against Blatter over a controversial deal "were well-founded" despite Swiss prosecutors dropping the case.

The deal had granted television rights for the 2010 and 2014 World Cups to the CFU, presided over at the time by Jack Warner, for \$600,000 (536,000 euros), an amount deemed to be significantly below market price.

"Blatter acted more in Warner's interests than those of FIFA," said one of the documents. "By failing to assert a claim by FIFA against the CFU when he found out about it, Blatter accepted that Warner would therefore illegally enrich himself at the expense of FIFA," added the investigators.

As a result of "the inaction of Blatter against the CFU or Warner, FIFA suffered damages amounting to \$3.78



Sepp Blatter

million." Blatter, however, still faces a second criminal investigation over the controversial payment of two million

Swiss francs (1.89 million euros) to Michel Platini, the former president of UEFA, in February 2011. —AFP

League on track for full season starting in Sept

LOS ANGELES: The National Football League (NFL), the only major American sporting league so far largely unaffected by the coronavirus outbreak, says it is on course to begin its season on time in September.

"We plan announcing late next week the full regular season schedule that begins with Kickoff on September 10 and culminates with the Super Bowl in Tampa February 7, 2021," NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said in an email to Reuters.

Each team is expected to play 16 regular season games as per usual, though the league is evaluating contingency plans should this prove untenable, multiple media outlets have reported.

It is yet to be announced whether fans will be allowed to attend games. While other major sporting leagues, including the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Baseball (MLB), have shut down due to the coronavirus, the NFL has been able to buy time before making any major decisions.

Its season ended in early February, shortly before evidence of a major coronavirus outbreak in the United States became widely known. Some areas of the US are now starting to emerge from lockdown as rules are relaxed even as the number of confirmed coronavirus cases rises in some states. Last week's NFL draft attracted record US television ratings in a country starved of live sporting action.

Meanwhile, Two days after his release from the Cincinnati Bengals, quarterback

Andy Dalton agreed to sign a one-year deal with the Dallas Cowboys to back up Dak Prescott, multiple outlets reported Saturday night.

Dalton's deal is reportedly worth up to \$7 million, with \$3 million guaranteed. The 32-year-old, who played in college at TCU, already has a home in Dallas and won't need to move, ESPN's Adam Schefter reported.

He had been connected to the Jacksonville Jaguars — whose offensive coordinator, Jay Gruden, coached Dalton for two years in Cincinnati — the New York Jets and the New England Patriots.

Dalton was released Thursday after nine seasons with the Bengals, who drafted LSU's Joe Burrow with the first overall pick last weekend. Dalton was due to earn \$17.7 million in 2020, the final season of a six-year contract extension he signed in August 2014.

He told the Bengals' website in a story published Friday that the timing of his release limited his options.

"This year there were a good amount of quarterbacks that were available," Dalton said. "I think it would have worked out differently if I had been a free agent when the new league year started (in March). I was still under contract, and that hurt me."

Dalton ranks first in Bengals history in touchdown passes (204) and second in passing yards (31,594). The three-time Pro Bowl selection started 133 of the Bengals' 144 regular-season games over the past nine seasons and had a 70-61-2 record.

He threw for 3,494 yards, 16 touchdowns and 14 interceptions in 13 games last year, getting benched briefly in the middle of the season in favor of rookie Ryan Finley. Prescott received the exclusive franchise tag from the Cowboys before he could hit free agency, giving him a one-year, \$31.4 million deal. The sides have until July 15 to work out a long-term extension. — Reuters

Brighton chief's 'integrity' fears in neutral venues plan

LONDON: Brighton chief executive Paul Barber fears plans to complete the Premier League season at neutral venues could have a "material effect on the integrity of the competition."

As the tournament wrestles with how to finish the campaign which still has 92 games to play, the idea of using up to 10 neutral venues for the behind closed doors games is seen as the only means to guarantee safety.

"Clearly, we must all be prepared to accept some compromises, and we fully appreciate why playing behind closed doors is very likely to be a necessary compromise to play our remaining games while continuing to fully support the government's efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus," Barber told the Brighton website.

"But at this critical point in the season playing matches in neutral venues has, in our view, potential to have a material effect on the integrity of the competition." Brighton were due to be at home for five of their remaining nine matches as they fight for their Premier League lives.

Barber worries the loss of home advantage could prove critical — even without fans. "The disadvantages of us not playing the league's top teams in our home stadium and in familiar surroundings, even with 27,000 Albion fans very unlikely to be present at the Amex, are very obvious," Barber said.

"Clearly, we must accept there may also be some benefit from playing our remaining four away matches at neutral venues but the fixture list simply isn't equally balanced at this stage of the season, and we didn't play our first 29 matches of the season in this way."

"So, in our opinion one thing doesn't cancel out the other." Britain's Press Association claimed the Premier League will look at using between eight and 10 stadiums, with venues likely to be chosen for ease of ensuring social distancing — which would appear to favour more out-of-town sites.

Some reports had even named Brighton's Amex Stadium as among the stadiums under consideration. However, Barber said it was speculation at this stage. "We haven't been asked if we would consider our stadium being used as a neutral venue for any remaining Premier League matches — by our colleagues at the league, the government or the police. "So I am unable to say why our stadium has been included in the reports," he said. —AFP

Some Serie A players to resume training

MILAN: Players from several Italian football clubs were on course to resume individual training as the Mediterranean country prepared to gradually roll back its coronavirus lockdown. The Italian government has been feuding for weeks with individual regions about which activities will be allowed when the nation begins to emerge from an economically crippling lockdown today.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte is lifting Italians' stay-at-home orders and permitting restaurants to resume takeout service next week. But Conte has delayed announcing a restart to the Serie A season for fear of another spike in contagions for a disease that has officially killed 28,710 in Italy — second only to the United States.

Conte is only allowing clubs to resume team training on May 18. Several regions that have avoided the worst of the outbreak say they will use a loophole to individual players to start training on Monday.

The voluntary sessions will affect teams such as Napoli in the south and the central Emilia-Romagna region's Bologna. Parma announced they will open their facilities next week for use by their squad members.

Rome's Lazio have also voiced plans to resume individual training at their sport centre. But rules published by Sassuolo made clear that none of their coaches or other staff will be involved in the sessions.

Up to six players on an open pitch at a time will be allowed and they will be barred from using the changing rooms to minimise the threat of contagion. Serie A clubs unanimously voted on Friday to finish the 2019-20 season — suspended since March 9 with Juventus leading Lazio by a point.

But Sports Minister Vincenzo Spadafora noted this week the chances of a restart were "increasingly narrow".

Meanwhile, Germany's minister for the interior and sport said yesterday he supports a resumption of the country's football season this month despite the coronavirus epidemic. "I find the schedule proposed by the German league plausible and I support the restart in May," Horst Seehofer told Bild newspaper, three days before a meeting of German authorities to discuss the issue.

The German Football League (DFL) backs a resumption of matches without spectators around mid-May, which would make it the first major European championship to make such a move. Seehofer, who plays a key government role on the issue as he holds several portfolios, has emphasised that the teams and players must respect several conditions.

"If there is a case of coronavirus in a team or its management, the club as a whole, and eventually also the team against which it last played, must go into quarantine for two weeks," he said. —AFP

18 England's Roy desperate to return to cricket, even behind closed doors



19 MGM pitches plan for NBA to finish season in Vegas: Report



19 FIFA requests Switzerland to continue Blatter probe



Biden backs women's team after lawsuit setback

'Don't give up this fight. This is not over yet'



NEW YORK: File photo taken on July 10, 2019 Megan Rapinoe (C) and members of the World Cup-winning US women's soccer team take part in a ticker tape parade for the women's World Cup champions in New York. A federal judge dismissed the United States women's soccer team's bid for equal pay on May 1, 2020, rejecting claims the players had been underpaid in a crushing defeat for the reigning world champions. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden on Saturday voiced his support for the US women's soccer team, a day after it suffered a setback in its gender discrimination lawsuit against the United States Soccer Federation.

The team's claims for equal pay were dismissed by a court on Friday, handing a victory to US Soccer. "Don't give up this fight. This is not over yet," Biden wrote in a tweet to the team.

"Equal pay, now. Or else when I'm president, you can go elsewhere for World Cup funding," Biden added to the federation. The former vice president is looking to unseat incumbent Republican Donald Trump in November's US presidential election.

The World Cup-winning team's long-running feud

with US Soccer has been a very public and bitter battle and the players had been seeking \$66 million in damages under the Equal Pay Act. On Friday, Judge R. Gary Klausner of the United States District Court for the Central District of California threw out the players' claims that they were underpaid in comparison with the men's national team.

The court allowed complaints of unfair medical, travel and training to proceed to trial, which is scheduled to begin June 16. "The WNT (Women's National Team) has been paid

“ Equal pay, now ”

more on both a cumulative and an average per-game basis than the MNT (Men's National Team) over the class period," the court said in its summary judgment.

U.S. Soccer on Friday said it wanted to work with the team to "chart a positive path forward to grow the game both here at home and around the world."

The players have said they plan to appeal the court's decision. Billie Jean King, who famously battled for equal pay in tennis, also offered words of encouragement to the team on Saturday.

"This is a setback, but it is not the end of the fight," she wrote on Twitter. "The pursuit of equality is a marathon not a sprint, and this lawsuit has generated a meaningful conversation about the treatment of women in sports," she said.

"One ruling does not diminish its impact." Last month US Soccer president Carlos Cordeiro resigned over language used in a court filing suggesting women possess less ability than men when it comes to soccer.

The language prompted an on-field protest by players, who wore their warmup jerseys inside out to obscure the US Soccer logo prior to a game, and a critical response from several of the team's commercial sponsors. — Reuters

New Zealand tell Beaumont: 'Rugby for all, not few'

PARIS: Former England captain Bill Beaumont was re-elected as World Rugby chairman on Saturday and immediately came under pressure to have the "courage" to make the big decisions. Beaumont beat ex-Argentina skipper Agustin Pichot to the top job, the governing body announced.

Beaumont, 68, who campaigned on the promise of opening up the sport, claimed 28 of the 51 votes to overcome the 45-year-old Pichot who planned to modernise the body and used the hashtag #GlobalGame on social media.

Once the round of congratulations had ended, New Zealand Rugby, who had backed Pichot, weighed in to remind Beaumont of his global responsibilities. "Gus ran a strong campaign and gave his best effort in a highly principled manner and that is all that can be asked, so we are proud of him," said New Zealand Rugby chief Brent Impey.

"There is still a level of governance reform that is

overdue, and it would be good to see the courage taken to make the decisions needed to ensure the continued sustainability and success of rugby globally — not just for a limited number of Unions and regions." Beaumont said he was honoured to resume his role at the top of World Rugby. "I would like to thank my union and region colleagues, members of the global rugby family and, of course, my family for their full support," said Beaumont in a statement released by World Rugby.

The announcement of the results was brought forward from the original date of May 12 due to the smoothness of the process. Beaumont, who will have another four-year tenure, will be joined by the French Rugby Federation's chief Bernard Laporte as his vice-chairman.

"Congratulations to my friend Sir Bill Beaumont on his re-election. I would also like to express my best wishes to Agustin Pichot, a legend of Argentinian rugby and a great rugby leader," said Laporte, who is set to oversee France hosting the 2023 World Cup.

"I also want to thank all unions who have expressed their opinion in this important ballot, giving a clear mandate for the governance which Bill and I will undertake on their behalf," he added.

The election process had been overshadowed by the resignation of Fiji Rugby Union (FRU) chairman Francis Kean from the world body's council after ac-

cusations of "rampant homophobia".

Beaumont's bid was seconded by the Pacific Island union but World Rugby stressed the former lock's nomination came from the FRU, rather than from Kean. Beaumont, who made 41 Test appearances for England as well as the British and Irish Lions before retiring in 1982, has overseen a \$100 million (90.8 million euros) relief package for the game during the coronavirus pandemic.

USA Rugby filed for bankruptcy in March and Rugby Australia said it was to lose around 69 million euros in revenue if the rest of their season was lost due to the outbreak. "During this unprecedented and global COVID-19 crisis, we must act and unite unions from the north and south and the professional leagues around a common objective to define a strong and sustainable future for all," he said.

"We will pursue these reforms together and act in solidarity with the rugby family, to drive the game forward on and off the field, further the welfare of our players and make the sport more attractive and accessible."

Pichot, who retired from the sport 11 years ago and had been World Rugby vice-chairman since 2016, hinted at trying for the main position again in the future. "Not this time, thanks to all for the support, from the bottom of my heart. #globalgame," Pichot posted on Twitter on Saturday. — AFP



Bill Beaumont