



6 Ramadan in ruins for displaced Idlib family



8 Philippines forces top media network off air



16 Women hail victory as Sudan moves to ban genital cutting



Ramadan KAREEM

Fajr	03:34
Dhuhr	11:45
Asr	15:20
Maghrib	18:28
Isha	19:53



Kuwait has 20,000+ hospital beds, will import remdesivir

MPs oppose salary cuts • Trump urges US to reopen • Wuhan students return to school

March Holding acquires 5% of Gulf Cable from Al Khair Global



Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi

KUWAIT: Renowned businessman Mohammad Charchafchi announced his acquisition of 5 percent of Gulf Cable & Electrical Industries Company for more than USD 18 million, placing him as a major shareholder and strategic partner to Gulf Cable's leading investor - Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi.

Charchafchi's March Holding acquired the stake from Al Khair Global through an off-market trade in Boursa Kuwait.



Charchafchi stated the investment was a result of a comprehensive study of all aspects of the Kuwaiti market, and the main rationale for selecting to invest in Gulf Cable was his utmost confidence in Al-Kharafi's management and strategic vision. He highlighted the company's operational efficiency in manufacturing electric products, its capability to expand further locally and regionally, as well as the executive management's ability to adapt to structural changes in the industry.

Charchafchi will have a pivotal role in developing the company's international presence due to his experience and relationships in the industrial space, including Iraq. Furthermore, Charchafchi pointed out that acquiring the stake in Gulf Cable will be the

Continued on Page 16

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The National Assembly's health and labor committee discussed with Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah and ministry officials the latest developments on the coronavirus and the Chinese medical team visit. MP Mohammad Al-Huwailah said ministry officials informed the committee that they have struck a deal with a US company to import sufficient quantities of the new coronavirus drug. The lawmaker was referring to remdesivir, which has reportedly shown positive results on coronavirus patients. He said the officials highlighted the strong measures taken by the health ministry in fighting the disease, reiterating the country's health system's capability to deal with the coronavirus.

Rapporteur of the committee MP Saadoun Hammad said that the ministry informed the panel that the Chinese report has not yet been sent as the team left Kuwait and will send its report soon. The minister told the panel that team members did not visit wards of Jaber Hospital, where hundreds of coronavirus patients are being treated, because the Chinese Embassy prevented them from doing so.

Hammad said the minister told the panel that 480 new beds, including 96 intensive care beds, have been allocated at Jahra Hospital for Kuwaiti coronavirus patients. The ministry also told the

panel that as many as 10,800 hospital beds have been made ready during the coronavirus crisis to add to around 10,000 other beds at various hospitals, he said. Hammad said that committee members called on the health ministry to provide more protection to medical staff dealing with the disease after a recent spike in infections among them.

Member of the committee Osama Al-Shaheen said that the danger from the coronavirus has not ended and that measures will not be eased until the disease curve starts to go down. He said health officials told the panel that 41 percent of cases in Kuwait do not show any symptoms, which poses a great danger in fighting the disease. Hammad also urged the education minister to officially end the school year and declare students in classes from one to 11 as having passed and adopt first term marks for 12th graders.

Meanwhile, MPs and the oil trade union yesterday criticized proposed government amendments to the labor law in the private sector which would allow employers to cut salaries of their staff. MP Humoud Al-Khudhair advised the government not to send its amendments to the National Assembly because they will be rejected, saying that rights of workers should not be curtailed. Khudhair also called on other lawmakers to reject the proposed amendments. The Cabinet on Monday approved in principle amendments to the labor law to allow

Continued on Page 16

Op-Ed

Working together and doing our best in a time of crisis



By Alina L. Romanowski
US Ambassador to Kuwait

Ramadan Kareem! Just about 100 days ago, I arrived in Kuwait as the US ambassador, eager to begin our next chapter in the long partnership between our countries. My most memorable moment from those first days was when I presented my credentials to His Highness the Amir. While we discussed many issues, our conversation focused on the strength of the enduring relationship between the United States and Kuwait and how we will work together to build a better future.

Only four weeks later, COVID-19 was changing everything. We have all felt its profound impact on our daily lives. With many airports and government offices closed, it affects diplomatic engagements, official visits and large gatherings.

It pushes us to employ technology in innovative ways: Virtual roundtables and webinars have become the norm. While we continue to engage frequently and work closely together, I think we all yearn to return to the time when we could meet in person and socialize with our friends and family. For me, the crisis means that I have not been able to experience fully Kuwait's renowned tradition of diwanias or see my husband and sons other than virtually since February.

While the safety of American citizens is always my top priority, COVID-19 changed the face of our security. Americans and Kuwaitis are working together to protect each other from both the mental and physical challenges of this invisible enemy. We worked to provide the

Continued on Page 16

Virus mis-info fuels hate against India's Muslims

NEW DELHI: Gayur Hassan's Hindu neighbors came at night, throwing stones at his family's home in a northern Indian village and setting his workshop on fire. All because his son "liked" a social media post. The Facebook post that Hassan's 19-year-old son endorsed had denounced the targeting of India's Muslim minority since the nation of 1.3 billion went into a coronavirus lockdown in late March. According to the police who arrested two men, his family was threatened with further retribution unless they shaved off their beards and stopped wearing skull caps.

"My forefathers lived here and I was born here," Hassan, 55, told AFP by phone from Keorak, their village where a dozen Muslim families live among about 150 Hindu households. "We lived like a family and religion was never an issue here," the welder said. But now there is "an atmosphere of fear and hate everywhere". The attack on the Hassan family was just the latest ugly incident in the wake of a torrent of coronavirus misinformation that is stoking hostility towards India's Muslims.

Continued on Page 16

Morocco launches drones to tackle virus from the sky

RABAT: Morocco has rapidly expanded its fleet of drones as it battles the coronavirus pandemic, deploying them for aerial surveillance, public service announcements and sanitization. "This is a real craze. In just weeks, demand has tripled in Morocco and other countries in the region," said Yassine Qamous, chief of Droneway Maroc, African distributor for leading Chinese drone company DJI. Moroccan firms have been using drones for years and Qamous says it "is among the most advanced countries in Africa" for unmanned flight, with a dedicated industrial base, researchers and qualified pilots.

Continued on Page 16



NEW DELHI: In this picture taken on May 4, 2020, a Muslim prays in front of closed shops in a market during the holy month of Ramadan under a government-imposed nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. — AFP

Fire breaks out at UAE residential tower, 7 injured

DUBAI: Firefighters brought under control a fire that broke out at a residential tower in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday night, Sharjah's government media office said. Seven people were treated for minor injuries from the fire in the tower in Sharjah's Al Nahda area and taken to hospital for treatment, the media office tweeted.

Videos on social media purportedly of the fire showed burning debris falling from a tower engulfed in flames, which local media said was the 48-storey Abcco Tower. Reuters could not immediately verify the footage. Residents of the tower were evacuated, Sharjah media office said. It did not say whether the cause of the fire was known. — Reuters



SHARJAH: People stand on a bridge and watch a fire that erupted in a 48-storey residential tower on Tuesday. — AFP

Local

Kuwaiti society donates \$600,000 to rebuild damaged houses in Iraq

UN Habitat-GCC rebuilt more than 3,000 houses since 2015

KUWAIT: UN Habitat-GCC said Tuesday it received a \$600,000 donation from Kuwait Society for Relief to rebuild damaged houses in Iraq, head of the UN agency said Tuesday. Dr Amira Al-Hassan, in a statement to the press after receiving the donation, said the UN Habitat was one of the UN agencies with a mandate to provide sustainable social and environmental support for cities and towns. She said local communities would be involved in the reconstruction process, a method that empowered people socially and economically thus contributing to peace and stability. UN Habitat will carry out reconstruction in areas that were recently liberated from militants in a drive to facilitate voluntary return of their original inhabitants, said Hassan. Since 2015, she added, the agency rebuilt more than



Improving people's living conditions

3,000 houses destroyed by conflicts including in Western Mosul, Ninewa, Senjar, Ramadi and Fallujah. UN Habitat engineers will conduct technical assessment of the damages before reconstruction.

Hassan said UN Habitat was committed to promoting proper services, housing and jobs for people affected by conflicts. Therefore, the UN agency would involve Iraqi individuals in this process in order to create jobs coupled with solid presence of UN engineers in order to guarantee quality of reconstruction. Abdulaziz Al-Obaid, Director General of Kuwait Society for Relief, said the society sought through UN Habitat-GCC to improve living conditions of people in need in Iraq. Obaid said the society was extending relief assistance around the world regardless of gender, color or religion. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Dr Amira Al-Hassan, head of the UN Habitat-GCC meets with Abdulaziz Al-Obaid, Director General of Kuwait Society for Relief. — KUNA

New labor laws for employees

Legalese

By Attorney Fajer Ahmed

There is a huge shift in the economy, and this means some are losing jobs while others are gaining jobs. Some companies are not able to operate as they predicted, and therefore are deciding to terminate people. Today I would like to talk about the new labor laws, as well as how businesses can move forward. Some people are reporting that around 250,000 expats might have lost their jobs already, but I am not sure how true this is.

New laws are under discussion right now by the Kuwaiti parliament - the idea of the new law is to allow the following:

1. Reductions of salary with mutual agreement, as in agreement with the employer. I have not read the text of the law, but I really hope this is capped at a percentage like 25 percent, which is the current maximum reduction of salary, and that the employee is given the option and is not forced into this.

2. The employee will have the right to choose to leave to their home country with all expenses incurred by the employer, while receiving three months' notice and termination indemnity. I hope this process is easy and flights are provided, and that the governments of the employees are aware of this decision.

On the bright side, they are also discussing punishments for those who trafficked employees into the country with false promises of jobs. I trust the government that it will come up with the best outcome in this difficult situation for the entire country. I would really love to hear your story in this tough time and how you even came to Kuwait to work, so please send me your story at fajer@tl-legal.com

News in brief

Ministry tests 270 employees

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Electricity and Water said that the Preventive Health Department tested 270 employees for novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on Tuesday as a precautionary measure and to limit the spread of infection among workers. The Ministry announced that it will close its doors in the main building until next. Meanwhile, Salwa Co-op Society announced that one of its employees tested positive for coronavirus. The Co-op will be closed for two days.

Cybercrime hotline

KUWAIT: The Electronic and Cybercrime Combating Department at the Ministry of Interior launched a WhatsApp service to answer public inquiries. The service is available to citizens and residents at the following number: 97283939

Curfew violators

KUWAIT: Police arrested 22 curfew violators on Tuesday, including 17 Kuwaitis and five expats, the Ministry of Interior announced. The arrests were made as follows: 11 in Farwaniya Governorate, three in Hawally, three in Al-Ahmadi, two in Jahra and one in Capital.

Oil price up

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by \$1.90 to \$20.31 per barrel Tuesday as oppose to \$18.41 pb the day before, said Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. Globally, the price of the Brent crude increased to \$24.22 per barrel, the same case with the West Texas Intermediate, which went up to \$30.36 pb.

Bahrain PM hails Kuwait's progress under Amir leadership

MANAMA: Bahrain's Prime Minister Prince Khalifa Al-Khalifa on Tuesday praised the stances of His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, which have helped strengthen his country's position in regional and international domains. Upon receiving Kuwait's Ambassador to Bahrain Sheikh Thamer Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, he also alluded to the progress and development witnessed by Kuwait under the Amir's wise leadership. Both countries share a "long history" of exceptional relations and mutual cooperation, the basis of which was created by their forefathers, he added, according to Bahrain's state news agency, BNA. The Prime Minister tasked the ambassador with delivering his greetings and words of appreciation to Their Highnesses the Amir, the Crown Prince and the Prime Minister. Meanwhile, the ambassador relayed His Highness the Amir's greetings and wishes of best health for the prime minister and growth and



MANAMA: Bahrain's Prime Minister Prince Khalifa Al-Khalifa meets with Kuwait's Ambassador to Bahrain Sheikh Thamer Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. — KUNA

prosperity for Bahrain and its people. He also expressed appreciation for the prime minister's commitment and support to improving relations and commended his objective vision in regards to re-

gional and international affairs. He also commended the efforts of the Bahraini governments to host Kuwaitis, saying this reflects the depth of relations between the two countries. — KUNA

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has recorded 5,804 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as of Tuesday, in addition to 40 deaths. With the exception of 90 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, 2,032 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, while there are 3,732 people receiving treatment and 4,599 quarantined as of yesterday afternoon. Kuwait is taking measures to test Kuwaitis coming from infected areas for potential infection, as it has already tested thousands of people.

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 quarantine for 14 days, during which the person is monitored, and prescribed health procedures are applied, the health ministry said. Kuwait had required 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. 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-ehealth.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-Khaldi (head of this team): daily 9:00 am - 12:00 pm. Call 9903-6470. Dr Ahmad Al-Khaldi: 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.

Local

Ministry provides food aid for expats in need

Service available online for article 18 visa holders

By Meshaal Al-Enezi

KUWAIT: Ministry of Social Affairs' assistant undersecretary for development affairs Hana Al-Hajeri announced a new online link through which the ministry can provide food aid to expatriates holding article 18 visas (private sector employees). Hajeri explained that workers can access the website link mosa.paci.gov.kw and request help to get food packages provided by various charities as part of the 'Faz'at Al-Kuwait' campaign. The website will provide applicants with special barcodes, allowing a maximum of six people to check in with the charity at a time. Hajeri added this is the second website link following one allocated for needy families at centralaid.mosal.gov.kw.

Fish market

Meanwhile, Kuwait Food Association called for reopening the Sharq fish market to the public using the appointment booking service and special barcodes similar to those used in co-ops. The association explained that there is an abundance of fish, which can also increase according to demand. The association's statement also noted that the Sharq fish market is spacious, air-conditioned and can serve a number of customers at a time by using the barcode booking system, with organized



KUWAIT: A screenshot of the interface of the website opened recently to allow expatriates holding article 18 visas to apply for food aid online.

entry and exit. The association expressed hope that the authorities will approve this demand, adding vendors will only sell in retail and stop auc-

tions that usually cause large crowds in order to maintain social distancing to help fight COVID-19, during non-curfew hours.

India issues repatriation guidelines

KUWAIT: The Indian government has issued standard operating protocols (SOPs) stipulating guidelines for repatriation of citizens stranded outside the country as part of the government's evacuation plan commencing on May 7.

In an official statement, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the government of India, stated that many Indian nationals who had travelled to different countries before the lockdown on various purposes such as employment, studies, tourism, business, etc, are stranded abroad. "Due to their prolonged stay abroad, they are facing distress and are desirous of returning to India urgently. Apart from the above cases, there are other Indian nationals who need to visit India in medical emergencies or death of a family member," the statement said. The SOPs have been issued with a view to facilitating the repatriation of such Indians in view of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world.

The persons who wish to be repatriated will have to register themselves with the Indian missions in the country where they are stranded along with necessary details as prescribed by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). They will travel to India by non-

scheduled commercial flights to be arranged by Ministry of Civil Aviation (MOCA) or naval ships to be arranged by department of Military Affairs (DMA). Only those crew and staff, who are tested COVID-19 negative, will be allowed to operate these flights or ships.

Priority

Regarding the priority for finalizing the list of evacuees, the statement said, priority will be given to compelling cases in distress, including migrant workers/laborers who have been laid off, short-term visa holders faced with expiry of visas, persons with medical emergency/pregnant women, elderly, those required to return to India due to death of family member and students.

However, the cost of travel must be borne by the travellers. Based on the registrations received, MEA will prepare flight/ship wise database of all such travellers, including details such as name, age, gender, mobile phone number, place of residence, place of final destination and information on RT-PCR test taken and its result. This data base will be shared by MEA with the respective state/union territories (UTs) in advance.

The travellers, before boarding, will have to give an undertaking that they would undergo mandatory institutional quarantine for a minimum of 14 days on arrival in India at their own cost. They also need to give an undertaking that they are making the journey at their own risk. At the time of boarding the flight/ship, the authorities will conduct thermal screening as per health protocol. Only asymptomatic

travellers would be allowed to board the flight/ship.

Self-declaration

A self-declaration form with health and personal details in duplicate will be filled in advance by all passengers coming from any point of entry. While on board the flight/ship, the health protocol must be strictly followed. This would include wearing of masks, environmental hygiene, respiratory hygiene, hand hygiene etc to be observed by airline/ ship staff, crew and all passengers.

On arrival, thermal screening, as per health protocol, would be carried out in respect of all the passengers by the health officials present at the airport/seaport/land port. All passengers shall be asked to download ArogyaSetu app on their mobile devices. The passengers found to be symptomatic during screening shall be immediately taken to medical facility as per health protocol.

The remaining passengers will be taken to suitable institutional quarantine facilities, to be arranged by the respective state/UT governments. If they test negative after 14 days, they will be allowed to go home and will undertake self-monitoring of their health for 14 more days as per protocol.

The remaining persons will be shifted to the medical facility. While on board the flight, health protocol as issued by MoCA will be strictly followed. This would include wearing of masks, environmental hygiene, respiratory hygiene, hand hygiene etc. to be observed by airline staff, crew and all passengers, according to the statement, according to the statement.

Humanity prevails

By Abdellatif Sharaa

local@kuwaittimes.com

About 5 pm on Tuesday, we noticed an Asian man, who obviously was not well at all. But we were almost sure he was free of coronavirus, because the severity of his condition did not include the symptoms of the virus infection. The man needed help, and we could not do anything, and finally called the police to ask what to do. The operator on the 112 hotline was extremely nice, spoke courteously and asked about the purpose of the call. Then she said someone will call in two minutes, and that's what happened. Shortly after that two police officers arrived.

The very first thing they did was to calm the man down, then tried to understand what was his problem. Anyhow, they looked for someone who could speak his language, and were trying to get his address to take him home, because he refused an ambulance. The policeman took the man, who could barely move, saying they will do their best to take him home and not jail. In fact we expected the policeman to be serious and strict during the curfew hours, but no; they went with the spirit of the law and were realistic with the job, so I must say thank you, a job well done!

Now on a different subject, I read an article by economic expert Amer Al-Tamimi about the current situation with the population structure in Kuwait. He said that too much talk is being made about the population structure following the arrangements taken to face the coronavirus pandemic that has affected the entire world. The precautionary measures by the health and security authorities in the country revealed worrying tragedies represented by the overcrowding of expat marginal laborers in residential areas and in buildings that do not have the minimum health prevention requirements and suitable environmental commitments.

He went on to say that the miserable situations the poor expats are suffering from are known, but the influence of sponsors and residency traders who brought those laborers have prevented suitable measures, while there are hundreds of thousands of expats in excess of what the marketplace needs, as it was discovered many of them are unemployed, their visas have expired and their sponsors did not correct their situation. Also, a large number of them have not gotten their salaries for many months. These situations have revealed that the sponsorship system is corrupt.

Tamimi mentioned how the population situation ended up to what it is now. He said we have to go back, may be more than 70 years, since the start of the oil era at the end of the '40s and start of '50s of the last century. Kuwait's population at the start of the '50s was not over 100,000, and the census of 1957 showed that the total population was 206,000, 114,000 of whom were considered Kuwaiti (55 percent).

He said we went through several stages during which Kuwait population reached 467,000 in 1965, 169,000 of whom were Kuwaiti (36 percent), while in 1975 the number rose to 995,000, and Kuwaitis represented 31 percent of the population. The number then rose to 1.2 million, 471,000 of whom were Kuwaiti (38 percent) in 1985. The 1990 census which was conducted before the Iraqi invasion showed the population of Kuwait was 2,142,000, 600,000 of whom were Kuwaiti (28 percent). That means Kuwait's population increased over 40 years from 1950 to 1990 15-fold. This increase is not normal in any human society governed by normal increases, but Kuwait is open to expat labor from Arab and neighboring countries as well as other Asian centers.

Tamimi believes that it is time to rationalize economic life and liquidate many facilities that became repetitive and saturated, and protect their owners from bankruptcy risks and the inability to face commitments. He said there must be a stop to human trafficking and follow the instructions of the International Labor Organization. He added that it is important to improve the education system and motivate citizens to join vocational training institutes to provide true Kuwaiti labor who can work in public and private sector establishments.

Final note: "Hate no one, no matter how much they've wronged you. Live humbly, no matter how wealthy you become. Think positively, no matter how hard life is. Give much even if you've been given little. Forgive all, especially yourself. And never stop praying for the best for everyone."

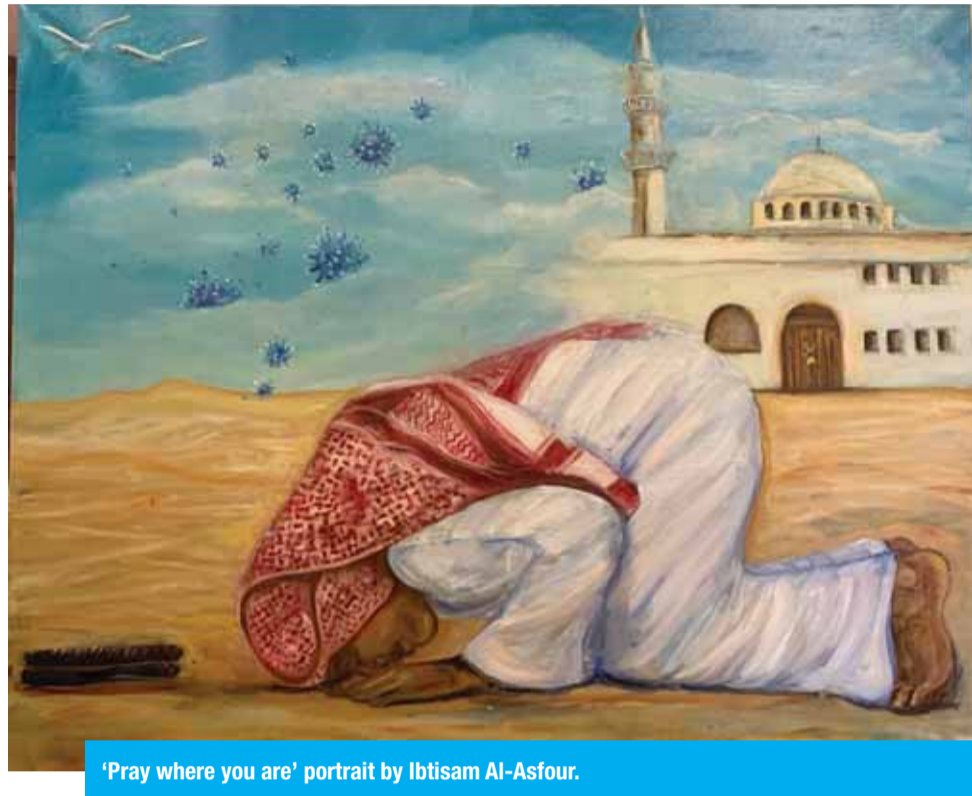
Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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Instagram exhibition highlights solidarity against COVID-19

Launched by the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters



'Pray where you are' portrait by Ibtisam Al-Asfour.



'Al-Mesaharati' (public awaker for 'sahur') portrait by Saleh Al-Alawi from Oman.

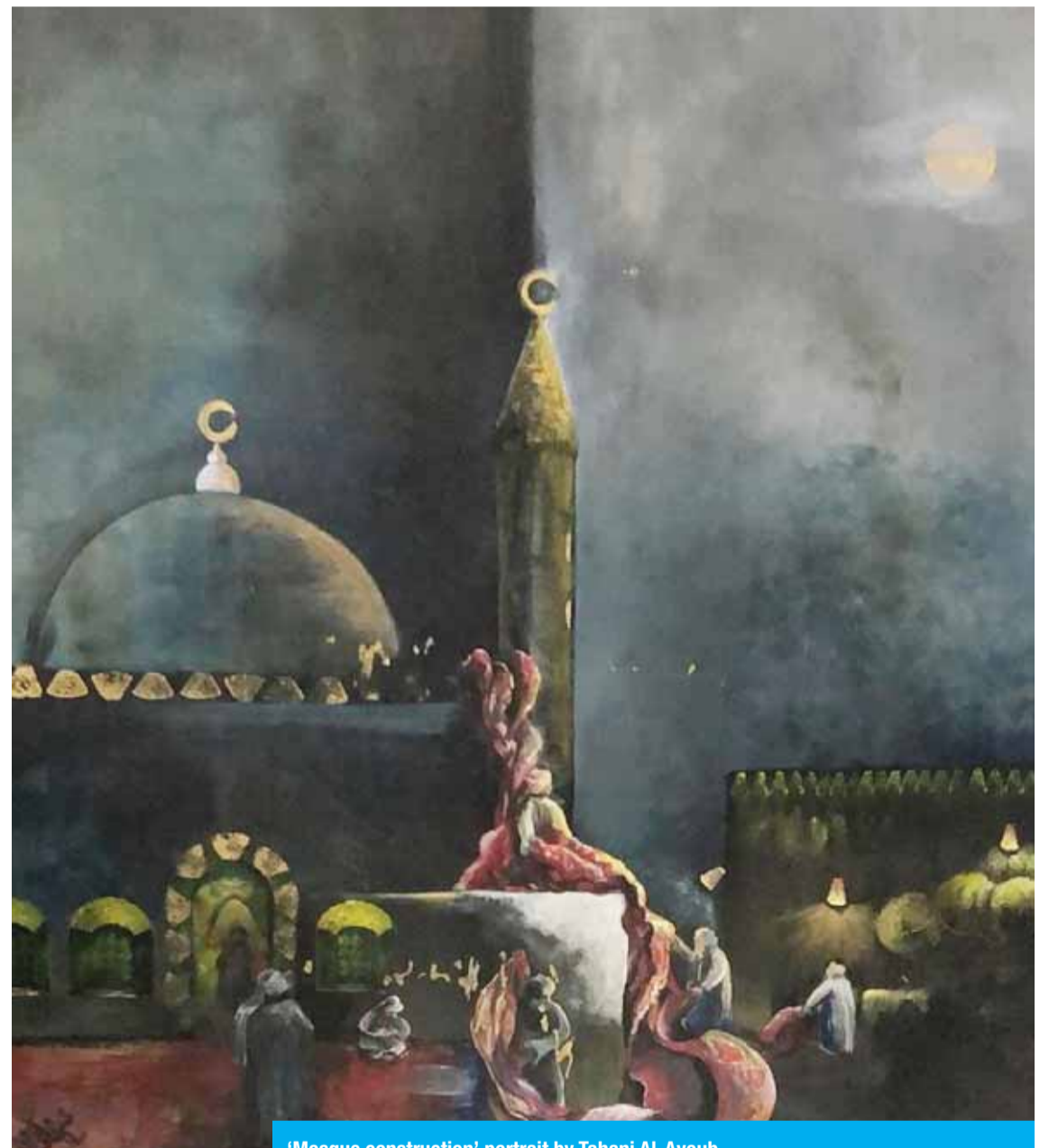


'Al-Fanous' (lantern) portrait by Ali Al-Ferdan from Bahrain.

KUWAIT: A social media exhibition hosting abstract painters from Kuwait and the Gulf is a message of solidarity in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, the head of a Kuwaiti cultural organization said on Tuesday. The Ramadan event, titled 'Kuwait Is Our Home,' launched by the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters on social networking website, Instagram, under the profile kwti_artists, grouped 22 artists. Art has long been a form expression, sometimes used to shed a positive light and hope on widescale humanitarian crises, such as war and pandemics, Secretary-General Kamel Al-Abduljalil said. The works depict the artists' reflections on the pandemic's impacts on the human psyche in an attempt to alleviate these effects through highlighting elements of joy and optimism that motivate resistance and attachment to one's life, he added.—KUNA



'Harfiyat' (letters) portrait by Dr Nasser Al-Refa'ie.



'Mosque construction' portrait by Tahani Al-Ayoub.

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Theatre institute opts for online learning

KUWAIT: In a bid to find solutions to resume schooling at the Higher Institute for Theatrical Arts after the current suspension imposed due to the spread of COVID-19, the head of the institute's teaching staff syndicate Dr Khalifa Al-Hajri said that in view of WHO reports which indicate that the disease has infected millions and caused hundreds of thousands of fatalities worldwide, and in compliance to the cabinet precautionary decisions and measures, the syndicate fully supports those precautions including social distancing. "As part of the civil community institutions, we decided forming a special voluntary committee including members from the syndicate, the institute students, artists and citizens to help face the impacts of this pandemic," he underlined.

Hajri added that in view of the global uncertainty about the end of this pandemic, which is expected to last for further months, the syndicate suggests opting to online-learning, which is already applied in some public and private local and international educational facilities despite its inadequacy for some majors and the fact that it had not been used earlier in Kuwait and the possibility that the outcome might not be up to standards. On that note, he said that they have decided to temporarily opt for online learning to resume the least form of learning according to the following conditions:

First: Ensure that teaching and administrative staff or students will be not be subject to any direct or indirect health dangers.

Second: Ensure that specialized medical staffs will supervise sterilizing and providing health-care in places such as studios, workshops and

training auditoriums.

Third: Issue official decisions and regulations to organize the process and define the duties and rights of teaching staff members.

Fourth: Have the institute departments set curriculums suitable for this stage, define the mechanism of education, testing, assessment and marking and have them approved by the institute board and specialized educationalists.

Fifth: Providing safe programs and applications for online learning and subjecting teaching staff members to intensified training course on using those programs and applications.

Sixth: Ensuring the safety of those application and protecting them against hacking.

Seventh: Providing enough administrative and technical staff specialized in following up online learning while fully observing the social distancing conditions.

Eighth: Providing teaching staff members and students with free memberships in Arabic and foreign electronic libraries to give them access to references and resources.

"We at the teaching staff syndicate are fully aware of the importance of resuming schooling because long suspension will be harmful to acquiring knowledge and the quality and outcome of education. We are ready to adapt with the solutions suggested by the state because we are all in the same boat. Nonetheless, we prioritize public health and will never take risks that would jeopardize people's health or overburden medical staffs and security forces," he concluded.



Dr Khalifa Al-Hajri

Local

Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: An old market forum of sellers and buyers. Men, women and children wearing traditional clothes mingling with old mud buildings and alleys. Bustling with life, the voices of vendors promoting their goods and children playing echoed throughout the market. (Source: A total of commemorative printed images to the Ministry of Information in the 1960s and 1970s. Prepared by: Mahmoud Aakaria Abu Alella, researcher in heritage, Ministry of Information)

Zain's inspirational Ramadan television commercial exceeds 12 million views

Overwhelming positive global reaction to Zain's message of hope amid COVID-19 crisis



KUWAIT: Zain Group, the leading mobile telecom innovator in eight markets across the Middle East and Africa recently launched its latest television commercial (TVC) to mark the commencement of the Holy Month of Ramadan. The content immediately amassed significant interest on social media platforms, with the 2.35 minute-long commercial being the most searched and viewed Arabic content across social media platforms, exceeding 12 million views on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bF16Ph3uEI>) within a week. The TVC was also aired on regional and local TV networks across the MENA region.

The concept behind Zain's latest TVC, which is entitled 'Zain's Consolation', which has also become known as 'God will not forsake us', is based on offering a message of hope in the midst of the current exceptional circumstances brought on by the Coronavirus pandemic. The shocking effects of the virus across the globe made the TVC's comforting words to resonate even more deeply with highly appreciative viewers. Words such as, "God will not forsake us" and "He'll make us richer than to need anything" within the accompanying soundtrack to the commercial offered an air of hope and optimism for people enduring hardships during this difficult time.

The TVC starts with images of the world standing puzzled at the alarming spread of this virus and considering ways to control it, with the soundtrack stating, "Until a vaccine is ready, let's inject the world with humanity."

Zain focused the commercial on the effects of Coronavirus on everyone, most notably people in the medical and security frontlines, and showcased the pandemic's devastating effect in separating families and enforcing social distancing. This was reflected in lyrics, "I asked my mother, what is the matter? Where have all the people gone?"

Zain also conjured up the emotional feelings people rely on at times of difficulty, including a scene where children look at the Kaaba at the Great Mosque of Mecca, and wonder why it is empty and when will it return to normal: thronging with the faithful.

This year's TVC is a humanitarian work of art, attempting to bring comfort, ultimate well-being, and hopefulness that God will uplift this affliction, and that

the houses of worship will open once more, and loved ones will meet again.

Every Ramadan, Zain seeks to present a new message in its TVCs that touches upon the most relevant issues in life, and this year was no different. In previous TVCs, Zain has addressed peace and tolerance, and highlighted the suffering of refugees, and the effects of disputes and conflicts on people regionally. The company has partnered with global entities including the United Nations to achieve its sustainability and humanitarian goals and communicated such in its Ramadan TVCs.

It is central to Zain that its commercials reflect the values of its brand, which is based on being a cornerstone of every community and country in which it serves. Zain views itself as a facilitator that enables people to enjoy aspects of their lives, sharing occasions with friends and family seamlessly.

'Zain's Consolation' did face technical challenges when being produced. Major national lockdowns around the world made it difficult for crew members to communicate, travel, and film the footage. Crew members had to excuse themselves for the project, though the Zain team overcame these challenges to ensure the project was completed and the message of hope was shared.

The TVC's original idea was generated by Zain's team in Kuwait, while the videography crew members originated from Egypt. The TVC was produced by Joy Productions in Kuwait and directed by Samir Aboud from Lebanon. The lyrics were written by Heba Hamada, and the music was composed by Kuwait's Bashar Al Shatti, while the TVC's music arrangement was performed by Michel Fadel, the mix and master by Rabea Saydawi with vocals by Rama Rabbat.

Notable positive reactions to the TVC on YouTube and across other social media platforms included: "Zain's TVCs always win, they make us feel the special taste of Ramadan, Eid, and other occasions." Another viewer commented, "This is not unusual. Every year Zain mesmerizes us with a new TVC, I can't stop watching!" A further viewer commented, "I'd play this a million times because it really touched my feelings," while another satisfied viewer commented, "After months of this crisis, I hope the world is filled with love and peace."

Ramadan: My Greatest Teacher

By Teresa Leshner

If Ramadan was a person, she would be the toughest teacher you ever had - the one who had strict rules, gave lots of homework, and drilled you until she was sure you understood the lessons she was trying to teach. Or Ramadan would be your coach who made you train hard, demanding more of you than you thought you could handle, challenging you every day until you mastered the moves or continually beat your previous times. These are the people who not only believed in the value of what they taught, but even more so, they believed in your capacity for achievement and growth. They worked you hard because they wanted you to succeed. They didn't just want you to pass their test or win the race, they wanted to change you forever - to transform you into a confident, disciplined and ambitious person. They wanted you to win. These are the people we feared, obeyed, respected, and eventually loved. These are the people who impacted our lives in untold ways, making us our best selves. We vaguely remember the grueling work and pain of their ways, but we will never forget what we learned about ourselves and how they made us feel.

Similar in every way, Ramadan has been my greatest teacher and coach. Ramadan has returned every year to remind me what I need to do to succeed, and to prove to me that I can do it. In the early years, it was about submitting my will to my Creator's will. I fasted because the Quran said, "Those of you who see the month shall fast." (2:185). It was hard, very hard. But I did it. Year after year, I fulfilled the requirements. But Ramadan wasn't satisfied with mere compliance. There was much more to learn.

I could have cheated. Nobody could have known for sure if I was really fasting. But I didn't, and that's when fasting honed my sincerity and integrity. If I were fasting for the people, to fit in or meet social or cultural expectations, I would have cheated all those times when I missed suhoor and started my fast on an empty stomach. It was those days when my sincerity was tested. The Quran says, "Fasting has been prescribed for you so that you may be God-conscious" (2:183). My awareness of God and sincerity to Him increased because of that great teacher, Ramadan.

The lessons spilled over into other areas of my life too. As I raised the children, pursued my

PhD, and learned how to recite the Quran, I relied on the self-discipline, focus and motivation that Ramadan instilled in me. I knew that if I could fast for an entire month in summer while those around me snacked on ice-cream and quenched their summer thirst, I could do anything - with God's help.

"It's not all about you!" said Ramadan. She taught me to think of others, those who thirst for clean water and hunger for regular meals - those who fast not by choice, but because there just isn't enough. Ramadan taught me to recognize hunger and thirst in others, which is easier when you yourself have experienced it. She taught me to respond to those in need with the compassion of one who has suffered from privation and longing, even if only for a few hours at a time. Ramadan taught me that we are responsible for one another, and that one person can make a difference in the life of another.

My teacher is persistent, preparing lessons for me after decades under her direction. Just when I get comfortable in my routine, Ramadan comes and destroys it, just to prove to me that in flexibility there is strength. Occasionally she challenges my complaints that I'm sick and proves to me that fasting does more good than harm, and that my health improves when I fast. She laughs when I say I'm getting old because she knows that fasting gets easier with age. Always there to challenge my attitudes, Ramadan keeps me both grounded in reality and open to the possibility of transformation.

For great teachers like Ramadan, I am immensely grateful. Grateful that I signed up, and that her tough ways and annual recurrence didn't allow me to forget a single lesson. Grateful that my understanding of God, self and others has expanded over time. Grateful that I could do it. However, entwined with my gratitude is a sense of humility. God Almighty extended the opportunity to me - I'll call it a scholarship - to learn under the great teacher Ramadan. It is His immense kindness and generosity that singled me out from the masses of humanity to answer His call. It is a humbling feeling to be chosen for such an advanced educational course, and even more humbling to know that each one of us has been invited. For all the opportunities that Ramadan promises, it would be silly to refuse.

— Courtesy of the TIES Center, whose mission is to 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 inter-faith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, please call 25231015/6 or e-mail: info@tiescenter.net.



Philippines forces top media network off air

Washington region - a new virus hotspot

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ARIHA: Members of the displaced Syrian family of Tareq Abu Ziad, from the town of Ariha in the southern countryside of the Idlib province, break their fast together for the sunset 'iftar' meal, in the midst of the rubble of their destroyed home upon their return to the town after fleeing during the previous military assault by Syrian government forces and their allies. — AFP

Ramadan in ruins for Idlib family

Syrian town looks like the scene of a monster earthquake

ARIHA: As dusk settles on the forest of gutted buildings around them, Tareq Abu Ziad and his family break the Ramadan fast on the remains of their home. The northern Syrian town of Ariha looks like the scene of a monster earthquake—a silent, grey sea of loose cinder blocks and mangled iron rods.

Abu Ziad had to make a little clearing in the rubble on his roof to lay three foam mattresses for his wife and children to sit on as they share their meal. “Now my family and I are here on top of the destruction,” the 29-year-old father of three says. “We are reliving a very difficult and painful memory. I pray that God doesn’t let anyone else experience this.” He and his family fled Ariha late last year when Syrian government troops backed by Russian air strikes launched an offensive against the town, controlled at the time by jihadist and rebel groups.

Within a few weeks, around a million civilians fled the assault on the wider Idlib region, the last strong-

hold of opposition to the government of President Bashar Al-Assad after nine years of war. Ariha’s entire population headed north as much of the town was razed to the ground. But as a ceasefire held, some of the most destitute have since opted to return and look for cheap accommodation amid the ruins. Abu Ziad came back last month and found a place to stay.

But he wanted to share at least one iftar—the meal that breaks the dawn-to-dusk fast—where his home used to be. “Every year we used to spend Ramadan here and we wanted to spend one day of this Ramadan here,” he says. All around them and as far as the eye could see, there is not a soul—just rows after rows of destroyed homes etching out a scraggly, sinister skyline in the twilight. The home’s kitchen is long gone, but Abu Ziad’s mother says they came prepared. “We brought ready meals from outside,” she explains. “The most important thing is that we relive our memories and eat in our home.” —AFP

row of destroyed homes etching out a scraggly, sinister skyline in the twilight. The home’s kitchen is long gone, but Abu Ziad’s mother says they came prepared. “We brought ready meals from outside,” she explains. “The most important thing is that we relive our memories and eat in our home.” —AFP

“ We are here on top of the destruction ”



AN NAYRAB: A Syrian man rides his motorbike past a damaged school building in Al-Mayrab, a village ravaged by pro-government forces bombardment near the M4 strategic highway, in the northwestern Idlib province. —AFP

Israel vows to keep up Syria operations

JERUSALEM: Israel will keep up its operations in Syria until its arch enemy Iran leaves, Defense Minister Naftali Bennett said Tuesday after strikes on Iranian-backed militias and their allies killed 14 fighters. Israel has launched hundreds of attacks in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011, targeting government troops, allied Iranian forces and fighters from Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. The Jewish state rarely confirms details of its operations in Syria but says Iran’s presence in support of President Bashar Al-Assad is a threat and that it will continue its attacks.

Bennett, speaking to the state-owned Kan 11 television news channel, did not claim Israeli responsibility for the latest overnight strikes on Syria. But he said: “Iran has nothing to do in Syria... (and) we won’t stop before they leave Syria”. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said the strikes came minutes after Syrian air defenses intercepted Israeli air raids over the north of the

country. A spokesman for the US-led coalition battling the Islamic State (IS) group said it was not responsible for the raids in the desert near the eastern Syrian town of Mayadin.

Bennett said Iran was “trying to establish itself on the border with Israel to threaten Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa”. His allegation is not new and has often been made by Israeli officials. “They have to leave Syria,” Bennett said. “This is our life we are talking about, the life of our children, and if we allowed them to settle in Syria... in a year we will wake up with 10,000 missiles, 20,000 missiles, that would put us in danger. For them it’s an adventure, they are 1,000 kilometers away... it’s their Vietnam in a way,” Bennett said.

‘Problems at home’

The Israeli defense minister said Iran should be more concerned with its own citizens and mounting domestic problems. “They have enough problems at home with the coronavirus (and) the collapsing economy,” he said. Iran on Tuesday announced that confirmed coronavirus infections had reached almost 100,000 in the Islamic republic while the overall death toll from COVID-19 topped 6,000. Iran is facing economic hardship that worsened after US President Donald Trump withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal and reimposed unilateral sanctions on

Tehran in 2018, targeting key oil and banking sectors. Bennett said Iran had become a “burden” for the Assad regime. “It used to be an asset for the Syrians, it helped Assad deal with Daesh, but now it’s a burden,” he said, referring to IS.

The overnight attacks in Syria were the latest in a spate of strikes on Israel’s neighbor. On Friday, the Observatory said Israeli raids hit a missile depot in eastern Syria that belonged to Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Lebanese movement that fought a war with Israel in 2006. That strike came a day after Germany designated Hezbollah a “Shiite terrorist organization,” winning applause from the Israeli government. Israel and the United States have long designated Hezbollah as a terrorist group.

And last week, Israel was accused of hitting pro-regime positions in Syria at least three times. Commenting on the apparent intensification of Israeli raids, Yoram Schweitzer of Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies told AFP the Jewish state might be reacting to increased hostile action from Iran and Hezbollah. It is also possible that Israel is trying to apply added pressure as its rivals endure the fallout of the coronavirus crisis, he said. “I don’t know which one of the two it is, but it might be a combination of the two,” Schweitzer said. —AFP

Egypt’s Habash ‘died of alcohol poisoning’ in jail

CAIRO: Egypt’s public prosecutor said Tuesday that alcohol poisoning caused the death in jail of a young music-video maker after he drank liquid sanitizer he had mistaken for water. Shady Habash, 24, who died in Tora prison in Cairo at the weekend, was imprisoned for directing a music video critical of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. “The deceased informed the physician on duty that he had drunk a quantity of alcohol at noon on the day before his death,” the prosecutor said in a statement. Alcohol-based sanitizers were distributed to inmates as a protective measure against the coronavirus pandemic, the statement added.

It quoted the physician as saying Habash mistook the bottle for one full of water and later complained of stomach cramps. “The physician gave him antiseptic and antispasmodic drugs and had him return to his cell to stabilise his condition,” the statement said. It added that when Habash’s health deteriorated, the physician decided to transfer him to a hospital outside the prison. The doctor tried reviving him but Habash died in custody before his transfer to a hospital, according to the public prosecutor.

In their investigation, the prosecution questioned three of his cell-mates with one saying that Habash admitted to drinking sanitizers “by accident” and that two 100 milliliter bottles of hand sanitizer were “discarded in the rubbish bin”. 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 Rami 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 5.8 million views on YouTube. Following the release of the statement, several human rights activists questioned on social media the veracity of the details of Habash’s death, arguing that it was tantamount to medical negligence.

Fearing the spread of the virus in overcrowded prisons, human rights defenders have called for the release of political prisoners and detainees awaiting trial. An estimated 60,000 detainees in Egypt are political prisoners, according to rights groups. These include 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

No meat? Climate-smart vegetables keep Kashmir fed amid COVID crisis

Kashmir's meat supply drops sharply

SRINAGAR: As a population of enthusiastic meat eaters, Kashmiris have felt the impact of India's coronavirus lockdown at almost every meal. Kashmir's meat supply, most of which comes from outside the Indian-administered region, has dropped sharply since a nationwide lockdown to stem the spread of the new coronavirus started on March 24.

Imports have stalled and many meat sellers around the Himalayan region have shut, explained Abdul Rashid, who usually eats mutton at least four days a week, but hasn't had any in the past month. To fill the empty space on their plates, millions of Kashmiris are turning to vegetables, which local farmers have been supplying in growing abundance over the past 15 years, after adopting new seeds and climate-smart growing methods.

"Our choices are very limited these days," said Rashid, who lives in a suburb of the regional capital, as he stopped to buy vegetables from a seller at a local market. "As vegetables are mostly produced locally, we get them fresh. And we know where they have come from," he said. Since the start of the lockdown, Kashmiris have been consuming large quantities of haakh - a local variant of collard greens - as well as spinach, potatoes and onions, according to the Kashmir Vegetable Dealers Association.

The boost in vegetable production is the result of changes including growing use of greenhouses and rainwater-harvesting systems, said Akhtar Malik, a curator at the University of Kashmir's botany department. The amount of land being used to grow vegetables in Kashmir has more than quadrupled since 1981, to 48,000 hectares, said Kashmir's Director for Agriculture Altaf Andrabi. "Our vegetable production is touching new heights annually. The number of vegetable growers has grown in thousands over recent years," he said, with over 100,000 people employed

if transport and sales jobs are included.

According to official figures, 70% of Kashmir's population of 7 million is directly or indirectly engaged in agriculture and associated sectors. Kashmir's farmers currently produce about 1,500 metric tonnes of vegetables per year, he said, which in the peak summer season not only meets local demand but also allows exports to other parts of India where growing crops such as tomatoes, okra and peas is difficult, he said.

That demand for exports is significantly rising with meat in short supply during the coronavirus shutdown, he told Thomson Reuters Foundation over the phone from his office in Srinagar. "Kashmir valley has the unique distinction of ... being able to make vegetables available to the rest of the country at a time when the whole country is in need of (more) vegetables," Andrabi said.

Millions of Kashmiris turning to vegetables

Greenhouse 'game changer'

The region's vegetable production ramped up in the early 2000s, when farmers began using high-yielding seed varieties and protecting seedlings in polyethylene plastic-covered greenhouses, said Mushtaq Chitu, a retired professor at Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology. Greenhouses were a "game changer", Chitu said, allowing farmers to grow all year round, even through the winter, and protect seedlings that once would have been washed away in the rainy season. Many farmers switched from rice farming to vegetables after discovering they could make five times as much money, he said.

While farmers in many parts of India have to wrestle with recurring drought, Kashmir's success in ramping up vegetable production has been built in part on improving water storage, said environmen-



KASHMIR: Women carry grass for cattle above their head as they walk on a street on the outskirts of Srinagar yesterday. — AFP

tal expert Shakil Romshoo. Installing irrigation systems is difficult in the mountainous and forested region, but farmers are using tube wells and ponds - and some have installed water storage tanks, said Romshoo, who heads the Earth Sciences Department at the University of Kashmir. More still needs to be done, though, he said.

"The government has said that it wants to increase farmers' income, (but) such goals can't be achieved if farmers have no easy access to water," he said. Andrabi at Kashmir's agriculture department said the government has helped many farmers without access to irrigation build water-harvesting tanks, and has dug wells and built irrigation canals where

possible. Reyaz Bhat, a farmer just outside of Srinagar, has two water-harvesting tanks - both of which he built because it was faster than waiting for help from the government, he said.

The tanks provide enough water to irrigate his half-acre vegetable farm, he said. Bhat, who swapped from growing maize to vegetables nearly a decade ago, now makes about 400,000 rupees (\$5,300) a year selling his collard greens, tomatoes, cabbage and other produce. "What I used to earn from maize is not even comparable to the returns I get from growing vegetables. The vegetables fetch me enough money to live a comfortable life," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. — Reuters

Brazil husband-wife doctors fight virus at work and home

SAO PAULO: Neither of the Sztajnoks is getting much sleep these days. Dr Jacques Sztajnok, head of intensive care at one of the main coronavirus hospitals in Sao Paulo, Brazil, says the stress of being on the front line of the pandemic often wakes him up in the middle of the night. His wife, Dr Fabiane Sztajnok, an infectious disease specialist in the hospital's emergency room, says the same. He spends his sleepless hours trawling through scientific studies, hoping to find something that will "add a piece to the COVID-19 puzzle," he said.

She awakens simply because she is "worried and anxious," she said. The Sztajnoks work at the Emilio Ribas Infectious Disease Institute in Brazil's biggest city, the epicenter of COVID-19 in Latin America. The pandemic has changed life in big and small ways for their family of four. Jacques, 55, and Fabiane, 47, no longer hug or kiss their children when they get home. Instead, they first shed their potentially contaminated clothes and head straight for the shower.

Jacques has not taken a day off since mid-March. "I'm responsible not only for my patients' health, but that of my team," he said. His intensive care unit's 11 beds have been full since mid-April, all with COVID-19 patients. On average, one has been dying each day. Several of his colleagues have also gotten sick. "Whenever my phone rings, I think, 'Do we have another doctor



SAO PAULO: Photo shows Dr Jacques Sztajnok (left), head of the intensive care unit (ICU) of the Emilio Ribas Infectious Disease Institute, and his wife Fabiane, an infectious diseases specialist in the same hospital, talking during an interview with AFP as their kids play in the foreground at their house in Sao Paulo. — AFP

who's gotten sick?' And that's a worry we've never had before, even in other epidemics," he said.

Front-line family

The Sztajnoks met, fittingly enough, during another epidemic: a measles outbreak in 1997. They live in a big, plant-filled apartment in the chic neighborhood of Pinheiros with their children, Ana, 12, and Daniel, 10. Ana said she does not worry about her parents, because "they're not in the high-risk group." Daniel, meanwhile,

thinks their work is "cool and courageous." "At dinner we always talk about what happened during their shifts. It's really interesting," he said.

The Sztajnoks say they feel the need to talk about their days more than ever. "It helps us get through to know we have the same objective, to know we're in this together," said Fabiane. But it can be hard to draw a line between work and home. They set a rule early on: evening time is to unplug and be together as a family. But sometimes it gets broken. — AFP

Biden's edge erodes Trump seen as better suited for economy

NEW YORK: Joe Biden's advantage over President Donald Trump in popular support has eroded in recent weeks as the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee struggles for visibility with voters during the coronavirus pandemic, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Tuesday. The opinion poll conducted on Monday and Tuesday found that 43% of registered voters said they would support Biden in the Nov. 3 presidential election, while 41% said they would back Trump. That makes the contest essentially a toss-up, as the results are within the poll's credibility interval.

Biden led by 6 percentage points in a similar poll last week and by 8 points in a poll that ran April 15 to 21. The former vice president has been forced to run his presidential campaign from his Delaware home in keeping with restrictions aimed at combating the virus, which has killed more than 70,000 people in the United States and put 30 million people out of work. By contrast, Trump has put himself at the helm of the US pandemic response, with regular White House briefings until recently.

Some of Biden's most dominant recent headlines focused on a former US Senate aide's allegation that he sexually assaulted her in 1993. Biden said last week the alleged assault "never hap-

pened" and asked the Senate to make public any documents related to the accusation by Tara Reade, who worked as a staff assistant in Biden's Senate office from December 1992 to August 1993. The political impact of the situation was not yet clear in the Reuters/Ipsos poll, which showed 53% of the American public said they were "somewhat" or "very" familiar with Reade's allegation.

According to the poll, 45% of Americans said Trump was better suited to create jobs, while 32% said Biden was the better candidate for that. That pushed Trump's advantage over Biden in terms of job creation to 13 points, compared with the Republican president's 6-point edge in a similar poll that ran in mid-April. Thirty-seven percent said Trump was better leading the country's coronavirus response, while 35% preferred Biden. A similar poll in mid-April showed Biden had a slight edge over Trump when it came to the nation's response to the disease.

Overall, 42% of Americans said they approved of Trump's performance in office, and 53% said they disapproved. The president's popularity has remained relatively flat for more than a year. The Reuters/Ipsos poll was conducted online, in English, throughout the United States. It gathered re-



PHOENIX: US President Donald Trump participates in a tour of a Honeywell International plant that manufactures personal protective equipment in Phoenix, Arizona on May 5, 2020. — AFP

sponses from 1,215 American adults, including 1,015 who identified as registered voters. It had a credibility interval, a measure of precision, of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

'Losers': Trump hits back

Meanwhile, a biting new anti-Trump ad by a group of dissident Republicans, including the husband of a top White House aide, prompted the US president to lash out Tuesday at the "losers" who created it. Tens of thousands of Americans have been killed by "a deadly virus Donald Trump ignored," according to the one-minute online video, ti-

ttled "Mourning in America."

It is a play on the famous 1984 re-election campaign commercial and slogan by Ronald Reagan, "Morning in America," and attacks Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic. "Under the leadership of Donald Trump, our country is weaker, and sicker, and poorer," the ad's narrator says, describing an "economy in shambles" with 26 million Americans out of work due to a nationwide shutdown. "And now, Americans are asking, if we have another four years like this, will there even be an America?" — Agencies

News in brief

'Remember the disabled'

UNITED NATIONS: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres yesterday called on governments around the world to specifically take into account the billions of people with disabilities in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Even under normal circumstances, persons with disabilities are less likely to access education, healthcare and income opportunities or participate in the community," Guterres said in a statement released in support of a UN study on people with disabilities. "The pandemic is intensifying these inequalities-and producing new threats," he said. "I urge governments to place people with disabilities at the center of COVID-19 response and recovery efforts and to consult and engage them," Guterres added. "We must guarantee the equal rights of people with disabilities to access healthcare and lifesaving procedures during the pandemic." — AFP

Justice Ginsburg hospitalized

WASHINGTON: US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, one of the four liberal justices on the top US court, was hospitalized for a benign gallbladder infection, the court said Tuesday. Ginsburg was treated at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore after a gallstone migrated to her cystic duct, blocking it and causing an infection. Ginsburg will spend a day or two in hospital to recover from the non-surgical procedure, the court said. "The Justice is resting comfortably and plans to participate in the oral argument teleconference tomorrow morning remotely from the hospital," the statement continued. Ginsburg was appointed to the court by President Bill Clinton in 1993. A hugely popular liberal stalwart and an unintentional social media icon, she is fondly known as "The Notorious R.B.G.," a riff on slain rapper The Notorious B.I.G. The 87-year-old jurist has already been had several health scares-she was hospitalized for chills and fever in 2019, and earlier that year she completed a course of outpatient radiation therapy for a localized malignant tumor on her pancreas. — AFP

Mayor pleads for help

RIO DE JANEIRO: The mayor of Manaus, the biggest city in the Amazon rainforest region, asked world leaders Tuesday for help fighting the novel coronavirus, which has brought his city's health system to the brink of collapse. Manaus is the capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, which has been devastated by the pandemic. Mayor Arthur Virgilio sent video messages and letters pleading for funds and medical equipment to 21 world leaders, including US President Donald Trump, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. "He emphasized the Amazon region's historic role in preserving the world's largest tropical rainforest," his office said in a statement. With only one intensive care unit to serve a state more than four times the area of Germany, Manaus has been overwhelmed by the outbreak, leaving hospitals to store cadavers in refrigerator trucks. — AFP

International

Philippines forces media network ABS-CBN off air

Authorities 'cracking down on press freedom'

MANILA: The Philippines' top broadcaster ABS-CBN was forced off air on Tuesday over a stalled operating license renewal, drawing fresh accusations that the authorities are cracking down on press freedom. Since running afoul of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, ABS-CBN has seen proposals to extend its franchise languish in Congress as he repeatedly attacked the conglomerate in speeches.



An assault on the right to free speech

Duterte is notorious for tangling with media outlets critical of his policies, sparking concern that press freedoms have been eroded. "It's painful for us that we are being shut down, but it's also painful for millions of our countrymen who believe that our service is important to them," chairman Mark Lopez told viewers just before the main channel went dark. Outside the company's broadcast compound, a handful of supporters waved placards against a backdrop of burning candles.

ABS-CBN's 25-year licence expired on Monday, but officials had previously given assurances the radio, TV and internet giant would be allowed to operate provisionally. However, the National Telecommunications Commission's cease-and-desist

order on Tuesday cited the expiration and said the outfit's operators would have to appeal for a return to the airwaves. Early in his term, Duterte accused the network of failing to broadcast his 2016 campaign advertisements and not returning the payments made for them.

'Dark day'

Rights and press freedom groups said the shutdown order was an assault on the right to free speech, as the conglomerate broadcasts news coverage watched by millions daily. The shutdown also comes with the nation battling to contain the coronavirus pandemic and an accompanying flood of online disinformation. "This is a very serious blow to press freedom in the Philippines," said Carlos Conde of Human Rights Watch. "It's hard to think that Duterte doesn't have anything to do with this."

Amnesty International's Butch Olan said the move was "especially reckless as the country deals with the COVID-19 pandemic". "This is a dark day for media freedom in the Philippines, reminiscent of martial law when the dictatorship seized control over news agencies." For Daniel Bastard, the head of the Asia-Pacific desk for Reporters Without Borders, the loss of ABS-CBN would reduce media pluralism "to the point of recalling the worst period of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship and signaling the end of democracy in the Philippines."

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said authorities in Manila "should not let political considerations affect administrative decisions regarding media outlets' licenses". It had appeared the broadcaster would get its renewal after publicly apologizing to Duterte earlier this year. However, government lawyer Jose Calida filed a legal case that sought



MANILA: A general view shows the ABS-CBN network headquarters in Quezon City, Manila. The Philippines' top broadcaster ABS-CBN on May 5 was ordered off the air over a stalled operating license renewal, drawing fresh charges that authorities were cracking down on press freedom. — AFP

ABS-CBN's immediate closure. Although the Supreme Court has yet to rule on the case, Calida warned it would be unlawful for the broadcaster to operate after its license expired.

Several major media outlets have suffered the consequences after battling Duterte. Journalist Maria Ressa faces years behind bars, after publishing critical

stories on her website Rappler—which is now also battling a government closure effort. Both Rappler and ABS-CBN are accused of violating a constitutional ban on foreign ownership of mass media outlets, allegations they deny. The Philippines is ranked 136th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index. — AFP



SEOUL: People wearing face masks walk through an underground shopping area in Seoul yesterday. South Korea returned largely to normal yesterday as workers went back to offices, and museums and libraries reopened under eased social distancing rules after new coronavirus cases dropped to a trickle. — AFP

South Korea returns largely to normal as outbreak controlled

SEOUL: South Korea returned largely to normal yesterday as workers went back to offices, and museums and libraries reopened under eased social distancing rules after new coronavirus cases dropped to a trickle. The South endured one of the worst early outbreaks of the disease outside China and while it never imposed a compulsory lockdown, strict social distancing had been widely observed since March.

Employees were urged to work from home where possible while the new school term was postponed from its March start. Scores of events—from K-pop concerts to sports seasons—were delayed or cancelled, while museums and galleries were closed and religious services suspended. But the South appears to have brought its outbreak under control thanks to an extensive "trace, test and treat" program that has drawn widespread praise.

In a population of 51 million, its death toll is little more than 250, and new cases have slowed to just a

handful - 13 in the past three days, all of them arriving international passengers. More than 90 of the South's imported cases are returning citizens. At least 100 people visited the National Museum of Korea in Seoul yesterday morning, and the first visitors of the day—a married couple—were given a bouquet of flowers by staff.

"Many of our colleagues also came back to work today, so we are very excited about the reopening, we are very happy," museum spokeswoman Lee Hyun-ju said. Some workers were bittersweet about going back to the office. "I wanted to go home as soon as I sat down at my desk in the office today. But there is also this weird sense of stability," wrote one Twitter poster. Another tweeted: "I feel like my holidays are now over." The South reported two new infections yesterday, taking the total to 10,806, the Korea Centers for Disease Control said.

Some professional sports, including baseball and soccer, are starting their new seasons this week after being postponed over virus fears, although the matches will be played behind closed doors. Schools are to reopen in stages starting from May 13. Under what Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun referred to as "everyday life quarantine", South Koreans are still encouraged to wear face masks and wash their hands frequently, among other recommendations. — AFP

exposure there," Gayles said. Montgomery County, to the north of the US capital, has about one million residents. As of Tuesday, it had 5,541 confirmed coronavirus cases and 292 deaths. Maryland as a whole has reported around 26,400 cases and more than 1,300 deaths.

Many of the area's essential workers are African-American or Hispanic, and their infection and death rates are considerably higher than those of the white population. "It is not uncommon that two families share a two-bedroom apartment," said Gayles. "When one is positive, it spreads quickly, and it is much more difficult to isolate." Other factors contributing to the high fatality rate among minorities are underlying health conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes, and a lack of insurance coverage.

'Social distancing fatigue'

There have been more than 5,300 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Washington, which has a population of around 700,000, and 264 deaths. African-Americans account for slightly less than half of the population of Washington—but 80 percent of the virus deaths. "This virus has not left the District," Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser said Monday. "We are where we thought we would be in having peak experiences during the month of May."

Bangkok's millionaires' club 'enjoys lockdown'

BANGKOK: Gourmet take-out delivered by a butler in a black sedan—Thailand's super-rich have not forgone luxury during a pandemic which has locked the country down, crushed the economy and left millions unemployed. Thailand is one of the most unequal nations in the world and the chasm between rich and poor is widening as the coronavirus eviscerates jobs, leaving 22 million registering for a government cash hand-out.

Hundreds line up daily for food donations across Bangkok, a grim sign of an economic contraction forecast at more than six percent this year—the worst since the Asian financial crisis in 1997. For rich Bangkokians the pandemic has brought the inconvenience of restricted movement—with an overnight curfew still in place despite some businesses reopening—but no end to the lifestyle of plenty.

Concierge company the Silver Voyage Club has retooled its services to meet the cravings of the elite, delivering high-end meals from the top-tier restaurants. "Our top clients are... high-net-worth individuals who are VIP from the banks," said founder Jakkapun Rattanapet. Concierge services kick in as part of a rewards program when bank account holders have "at least US\$1 million", he explained. His company launched White Glove Delivery after their concierge business took a nose dive as global business travel staggered to a halt.

Wagyu beef, seafood and dim sum are on offer from 20 restaurants, some housed in luxury hotels or listed on the Michelin Guide. Clients include corporate diners and celebrities, their meals delivered in carefully packaged boxes to their housekeepers in upscale Bangkok neighborhoods or to company headquarters. A butler-wearing white gloves-can also come along to set the table and present the food. As part of the fight against COVID-19, White Glove also donates 1,000 meals a day to frontline workers in hospitals, Jakkapun said.

Thailand has 27 billionaires, according to Forbes, with the Chearavanont family who head agro-industrial conglomerate CP Group topping the list worth an estimated \$27.3 billion. They pledged US\$29 million to the government last month the same day premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha called for the country's super-rich to dig deep to help stave off economic ruin. Restrictions on Bangkok's restaurants were eased Sunday allowing customers to eat-in with social distancing. — AFP



LAUREL: Employees wearing face masks continue to work in the research and development cooking lab at PastryStar in Laurel, Maryland. — AFP

Amanda Castel, a professor in the epidemiology department at George Washington University, said the rise in the number of cases is due to some extent to increased testing capacity. "People should not be alarmed that the numbers continue to go up," Castel told AFP, adding they should instead be "reassured that social distancing is working." "There are more test kits and more testing sites," she said. "We are building capacities to test more individuals. — AFP

News in brief

Israel hits Hamas positions

JERUSALEM: The Israeli army attacked military positions of the Islamist Hamas movement yesterday after militants in the Palestinian enclave fired a rocket at the Jewish state, the army said. "A rocket was fired from the Gaza Strip towards Israeli territory," the army said in a statement. "In response, an (army) tank targeted three Hamas military posts in the northern Gaza Strip." A security source in Gaza confirmed three positions had been damaged, but reported no casualties. The Gaza rocket hit an open field near the border, with no immediate reports of casualties or damage, a military spokeswoman said. Yesterday's rocket was the first since March 27, and came as Israel was lifting restrictions imposed during the coronavirus outbreak. — AFP

3 Iran Guards killed in clash

TEHRAN: Three members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards were killed in a clash with a "counter-revolutionary" group in the western province of Kurdistan on Tuesday, ISNA news agency reported. "Colonel Shakiba Salimi and two other brave fighters of Islam, Jafar Nezampour and Majid Shokri, were martyred after fighting and killing a number of counter-revolutionary elements," ISNA quoted a Guards statement as saying. The clash occurred near the town of Divandareh, the statement added, without naming the group. For much of the past 40 years, Iran has been battling Kurdish militants who use bases in neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan to stage attacks against the Guards and state institutions inside the country. — AFP

Ministers to be questioned

BRASILIA: Three top ministers to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro will face questioning in a potentially damaging probe on whether the far-right leader obstructed justice, after the Supreme Court granted investigators' request for access Tuesday. The case stems from accusations by former justice minister Sergio Moro, who resigned in protest last month after Bolsonaro fired the federal police chief. In a scathing last press conference, Moro, a popular anti-corruption crusader, accused Bolsonaro of improper interference in police investigations. He did not say which ones, but the federal police are reportedly investigating several cases involving Bolsonaro and his sons. — AFP

Germany to reopen shops

BERLIN: Germany will take new steps towards normalization in May, including reopening shops and schools after weeks of shutdown imposed to control the spread of the coronavirus, according to a draft agreement seen by AFP yesterday. "Even after initial steps to open up were introduced from April 20, the number of new infections remained low," the document read, with "no new wave of infection" so far detected—justifying the series of bolder reopening steps. So far, only certain children like those soon facing exams had been allowed to return to class. But now kindergartens and primary schools will also reopen from next week. "Step-by-step, schools should make possible education of all pupils while implementing appropriate hygiene measures and upholding distancing rules," the document read. Chancellor Angela Merkel and premiers from Germany's 16 federal states are expected to sign off on the text later. — AFP

Washington region a new virus hotspot

WASHINGTON: Despite more than a month of stay-at-home orders, the Washington region has become a coronavirus hotspot—and the African-American and Latino populations of the US capital have been particularly hard hit. Washington and the neighboring states of Maryland and Virginia now have more than 50,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and there have been some 2,300 deaths.

Maryland Governor Larry Hogan predicted in early April that the area would see the next major outbreak and was about two weeks behind New York, the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States. Despite the closure of schools and non-essential businesses and a lockdown since the end of March, the number of infections, hospitalizations and deaths has continued to rise in the region.

"We are a highly populated area with a high density," said Travis Gayles, chief of public health services in Maryland's Montgomery County, which borders Washington. "We still have a high number of essential workers that have to go to work and are subject to

Business

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10 US airlines burn through \$10bn a month as traffic plummets



10 Airbnb slashes staff in bid to ride out pandemic



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NEW YORK CITY: A man walks past a store going out of business on Tuesday in the Brooklyn borough in New York City. —AFP

US set for historic unemployment surge

Grim and getting worse scenario as coronavirus takes massive toll on economy

WASHINGTON: Like a global tsunami, the coronavirus pandemic has caused a huge loss of life and taken a massive economic toll. In the US economy, skyrocketing unemployment is the most-visible sign of the devastation: almost overnight, at least 30 million workers lost their jobs.

The April employment report, due out Friday, is expected to show the unemployment rate soaring into double digits, perhaps as high as 20 percent, far surpassing the worst of the global financial crisis and reaching levels not seen since the Great Depression last century. The US government and central bank worked at a stunning pace to rush out aid and financing to workers and businesses to try to prevent a complete economic collapse, but there is a growing fear that the temporary shutdowns imposed to contain the spread of the virus will become permanent for many companies.

The coronavirus has infected nearly 1.2 million people in the United States and killed around 70,000, according to a count from Johns Hopkins University, and analysts fear some of the economic damage may be permanent.

"We took the elevator down, but we're going to need to take the stairs back up," Tom Barkin, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, said in a recent speech.

Despite nearly \$3 trillion in financial aid approved by Congress in March alone and trillions more in liquidity provided by the Federal Reserve, the US economy contracted by 4.8 percent in the first three months of the year—a period that included only a couple of weeks of the strict business shutdowns.

The second quarter could see the economy plunge by twice that amount.

Qatar Airways warns of job losses

DOHA: Qatar Airways has warned its employees of "substantial" redundancies amid a collapse in demand for air travel caused by the coronavirus, according to an internal memo seen by AFP Tuesday.

The Gulf airline, which flew to more than 170 destinations with 234 aircraft as of March, has been hit by airport closures and travel bans imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19. The International Air Transport Association warned last month that air traffic in the Middle East and North Africa would plummet by more than half this year.

The worst is yet to come

The data on the jobs market has become so bad so fast that there are no comparisons. Statisticians in the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), which produces the monthly unemployment report, are using natural disasters as a point of reference. "The closest that we have in terms of what was in our play-book has been usually hurricanes, because they tend to be large and impact significant periods of time, or areas," BLS Associate Commissioner Julie Hatch Maxfield told AFP.



30m workers lose jobs overnight

But even devastating events, like Hurricane Katrina in 2005, were regional—not national and certainly not global. The job losses spread from airlines and hotels to restaurants and factories as states ordered lockdowns and then closed schools, sending initial claims for unemployment insurance surging from mid-March, with 20 million posted in the four weeks of April alone.

But those figures could underestimate the true size of the shock, since many people have not been able to file for benefits, and others do not qualify.

The official unemployment rate in March jumped

from a historic low of 3.5 percent to 4.4 percent, with 701,000 jobs lost. But the monthly data, which are separate from the jobless claims reports, are calculated only during the pay period that includes the 12th day of each month, so they too missed the real picture. BLS said the survey of households likely underestimated the jobless rate, which should have been 5.4 percent.

April will be far worse, with some economists projecting jobs losses at 28 million and a 17 percent unemployment rate. And as more businesses report their data, job losses in March are expected to be revised higher as well.

False rebound, slow comeback

By comparison, job losses during the global financial crisis in 2008 and 2009 totaled 8.6 million and the unemployment rate peaked at 10 percent. Even among workers who are still employed, many have seen their hours cut. Economists also fear the gains made during the economic expansion from 2009 in incorporating more minorities into the workforce are being eroded.

"It's now clear the economy was in a downdraft much more rapidly than anyone expected," Diane Swonk, chief economist at Grant Thornton, told AFP.

The expansive government aid programs mean the US might see a temporary pickup in hiring in May and June, Swonk said. But if small businesses aren't fully back to normal by July, which will be determined by whether consumers feel safe enough to go back to restaurants and shops, "they're going to have to lay them off again," she said.

Last week, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell warned about the lingering damage caused by the temporary shutdowns and said it "will take some time for us to get back to a more normal level of unemployment." —AFP

"The truth is, we simply cannot sustain the current staff numbers and will need to make a substantial number of jobs redundant—inclusive of cabin crew," Qatar Airways chief executive Abkar al-Baker wrote in a memo to cabin crew dated Monday.

The note did not specify how many of its more than 30,000 staff were at risk of redundancy, although the airline has had to slash its passenger services to just 35 destinations. "The unparalleled impact on our industry has caused significant challenges for all airlines and we must act decisively to protect the future of our business," the airline said in a statement.

"As a result, Qatar Airways can confirm that the airline will make a number of roles redundant due to the impact of COVID-19. Any job loss is regrettable and we will be working closely with all affected employees to offer our full support during this difficult time." —AFP



DOHA: People hold the Rwandan and Qatari flags as supplies to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic donated by the Qatar Fund for Development are loaded onto a Qatar Airways flight at Doha's Hamad International Airport. Qatar Airways has warned its employees of "substantial" redundancies amid a collapse in demand for air travel caused by the coronavirus. —AFP

Lebanese banks draft national rescue plan

BEIRUT: Lebanese banks are working on a national financial rescue plan that would preserve some of their capital rather than writing it all off as outlined in a government program, the banking association head said on Tuesday.

The Association of Banks in Lebanon (ABL) has criticized the plan approved by the government last week, saying it would "further destroy confidence" in the heavily-indebted country which is facing economic and financial meltdown.

The government plan, which will form the basis of talks on financial aid with International Monetary Fund, aims to steer Lebanon out of a crisis seen as the biggest threat to stability since the 1975-90 civil war. "The government plan has completely neglected the banking sector," ABL Chairman Salim Sfeir told Reuters, saying banks wanted to discuss their proposals with government experts to "recreate confidence in order to create the new Lebanon." The bankers' proposals would be released in a week to 10 days, he said.

Lebanon's banks have been a major lender to government for decades, helping to finance a wasteful and corrupt state which in March defaulted on its sovereign debt for the first time. ABL said last week the government plan had unfairly shifted blame for the crisis onto banks, adopting a punitive approach to the sector and, by extension, its depositors.

The crisis has resulted in depositors largely being shut out of their savings and the local currency shedding more than half its value since October as dollars have become ever more scarce. Under the government plan, the capital of banks in Lebanon would be written off with a full bail-in of shareholders.

The combined capital of Lebanon's banks is 31 trillion Lebanese pounds, equivalent to \$20.6 billion at the official exchange rate of 1,507.5 pounds to the dollar or \$8.9 billion at a weaker rate of 3,500 pounds used in the government's plan. The plan calls for the recapitalisation of the banking sector, a task bankers say would prove difficult given Lebanon's financial turmoil. Banks that cannot raise fresh capital could be forced out of business, further hurting the economy. —Reuters

Business

US airlines burn through \$10bn a month as traffic plummets

More than 3,000 US aircraft grounded after COVID-19 pandemic

WASHINGTON: US airlines are collectively burning more than \$10 billion in cash a month and averaging fewer than two dozen passengers per domestic flight because of the coronavirus pandemic, industry trade group Airlines for America said in prepared testimony seen by Reuters ahead of a US Senate hearing today.

Even after grounding more than 3,000 aircraft, or nearly 50 percent of the active US fleet, the group said its member carriers, which include the four largest US airlines, were averaging just 17 passengers per domestic flight and 29 passengers per international flight.

"The US airline industry will emerge from this crisis a mere shadow of what it was just three short months ago," the group's chief executive, Nicholas Calio, will say, according to his prepared testimony.

Net booked passengers have fallen by nearly 100 percent year-on-year, according to the testimony before the Senate Commerce Committee. The group warned that if air carriers were to refund all tickets, including those purchased as nonrefundable or those canceled by a passenger instead of the carrier, "this will result in negative cash balances that will lead to bankruptcy."

Separately, Eric Fanning, who heads the Aerospace Industries Association, will ask Congress to consider providing "temporary and targeted assistance for the ailing aviation manufacturing sector," in testimony made public by the group. Boeing Co said last week it would cut

16,000 jobs by the end of the year, while GE Aviation plans to cut up to 13,000 jobs and airplane supplier Spirit AeroSystems Holdings Inc is cutting 1,450 jobs.

Fanning will say at the hearing that "there is strong support in our industry for a private-public partnership to protect jobs and keep at-risk employees on the payroll through the pandemic."

He will also raise concerns about some Federal Reserve and US Treasury lending programs that have "conditions that prevent companies from accessing this aid with the speed and flexibility required."

'Difficult path ahead'

US airlines have canceled hundreds of thousands of flights, including 80 percent or more of scheduled flights into June as US passenger traffic has fallen by 95 percent since March. They are conducting additional cleaning mea-

sures and requiring all passengers to wear facial coverings. Calio said airlines "anticipate a long and difficult road ahead. ... History has shown that air transport demand has never experienced a V-shaped recovery from a downturn."

The US Treasury has awarded nearly \$25 billion in cash grants to airlines to help them meet payroll costs in exchange for them agreeing not to lay off workers through Sept. 30. Major airlines have warned they will likely need to make additional cuts later this year to respond to a long-term decline in travel demand.

Airlines carry 17 passengers per flight



WASHINGTON: A United Airlines Airbus A319-100 taxis at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington, Virginia. United Airlines plans to lay off about 30 percent of its managers as the coronavirus slows global air travel sharply. —AFP

United Airlines Co said on Monday it planned to cut at least 3,450 management and administrative workers on Oct. 1, or 30 percent of those workers and has also said it will reduce hours for thousands of other workers. The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers sued United on Tuesday in US District Court in New York for

what it called an "illegal implementation of drastic pay and benefit cuts."

United said in a statement that the lawsuit was "meritless," and that the reductions were in compliance with the terms of its \$5 billion in federal assistance and its collective bargaining agreements. —Reuters

US businesses want protections from lawsuits

NEW YORK: Wando Evans, who worked overnight shifts at a Walmart near Chicago, passed away in March from COVID-19. His family blames the company and is suing the retail giant for negligence.

The case, believed to be the first wrongful death lawsuit over coronavirus, comes amid a burgeoning debate in Washington on whether companies need to be shielded from lawsuits from workers as more businesses resume activities. Evans, 51, died two days after he complained of coronavirus-like symptoms and was sent home by his supervisor. Four days later, Evans' colleague at the store, Phillip Thomas, passed away, according to the complaint.

The suit alleges that Walmart did not properly sanitize its stores, respect social distancing standards or provide workers with masks and other personal protective gear. Walmart is "heartbroken" at the deaths and taking action to protect employees, including additional cleaning measures, installing sneeze guards at registers and limiting the number of customers, a Walmart spokesman said.

"We take this issue seriously and will respond as appropriate with the court."

On-the-job injuries in the US typically are adjudicated through an administrative worker's compensation process at the state level that shields employers from liability, although there can be exceptions for negligence. Lindsay Burke, a partner at Covington & Burling focused on employment practice, said companies should follow government guidelines to protect themselves legally as they bring employees back into the workplace.

"We are generally advising employers to resume on-site operations in a voluntary and phased approach with new protocols for health and hygiene," Burke said. "Employers who fail to follow applicable health and safety recommendations, including increased cleaning measures and adapting social distancing in the workplace, may be subject to claims of negligence or misconduct."

The US Chamber of Commerce said it favored "providing a safe harbor for companies following CDC or state/local health department guidance could be helpful so long as the companies' actions do not amount to gross negligence, recklessness, or willful misconduct." Linda Kelly, general counsel at the National Association of Manufacturers, said the protection should be "limited to critical businesses that operate to serve our country during the crisis, and they should apply only during the emergency and for a 'wind-down' period after the declared emergency ends."

The measures are needed, business organizations say, because health privacy concerns can limit their ability to do contact tracing in the event that an employee is positive for COVID-19. Some companies have also struggled to find sufficient personal protective equipment due to limited supplies.

These arguments have won support from the Trump administration and most Senate Republicans, including Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, who told Fox News Radio that trial lawyers are "sharpening their pencils." But Senate Democrats have pushed back against broad efforts to shield companies from immunity. Labor unions are also fighting the measures. —AFP

Firms join alliance calling for 'open' 5G systems

WASHINGTON: More than 30 technology and telecom firms unveiled an alliance Tuesday to press for "open and interoperable" 5G wireless systems that eliminate the need for a single supplier.

The move comes amid heightened global debate over politically sensitive deployment of the ultrafast fifth-generation networks in a market led by Chinese-based Huawei, along with European-based Nokia and Ericsson. The new Open RAN Policy Coalition said an open-standards system with competitive bidding for various components in a "radio access network" would avoid depending on any single technology supplier. The alliance of 31 firms is "letting (wireless) providers know there are options" other than "a single vendor with a closed proprietary system," said Diane Rinaldo, coalition executive director.

The group includes large technology firms Microsoft, Google, IBM and Cisco; carriers including AT&T and

Verizon in the United States and global operators Vodafone, Rakuten and Telefonica; and hardware and chip-making firms Qualcomm, Intel and Samsung.

Rinaldo told AFP that "the coalition was not formed to address concerns about any particular company but to discuss the need to have a robust supply chain and prevent any one company from dominating." The move comes however with Washington banning Huawei from American networks amid what officials say are national security concerns, and urging US allies to follow suit.

"As evidenced by the current global pandemic, vendor choice and flexibility in next-generation network deployments are necessary from a security and performance standpoint," Rinaldo said.

"By promoting policies that standardize and develop open interfaces, we can ensure interoperability and security across different players and potentially lower the barrier to entry for new innovators." Rinaldo said the alliance is promoting privately deployed networks in the United States, with the federal government helping to foster a diverse supply

Airbnb slashes staff in effort to ride out pandemic

SAN FRANCISCO: Home-sharing platform Airbnb said Tuesday it will slash one fourth of its workforce—some 1,900 people—as the coronavirus pandemic crushes the travel industry.

The cuts are needed for the San Francisco-based company to survive until people start traveling anew, Airbnb co-founder and chief executive Brian Chesky said in a blog post.

"We are collectively living through the most harrowing crisis of our lifetime, and as it began to unfold, global travel came to a standstill," Chesky said. Airbnb explained that it will try to soften the blow with benefits including providing 12 months of health insurance to laid-off workers.

The job cuts will be spread about

Microsoft to invest \$1bn in Poland cloud

WARSAW: Microsoft on Tuesday announced it would invest one billion dollars in Poland to expand its operations, including the creation of a new regional cloud-computing data hub.

The US tech giant said it had signed an agreement with Poland's state-backed National Cloud Operator to provide "cloud solutions for all industries and companies in Poland", according to a statement on its web-

site. "Another great global player chose Poland to locate its investment, worth as much as \$1 billion, the largest in our region of Europe," Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Tuesday on his official Facebook page.

"This is another important step on the road to digitisation and accelerating the development of the entire Polish economy." The investment project is expected to last seven years, Microsoft said. Microsoft is among the global leaders in providing cloud services—an industry worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

The fresh resources will enable the San Francisco-based company to invest in its community of "hosts" as well as local experiences provided along with stays in homes, Chesky said at the time. Airbnb planned to focus particularly on long-term stays, from students needing housing to remote

workers, building on a rising demand the platform has seen as people self-isolate during the pandemic.

The company recently announced

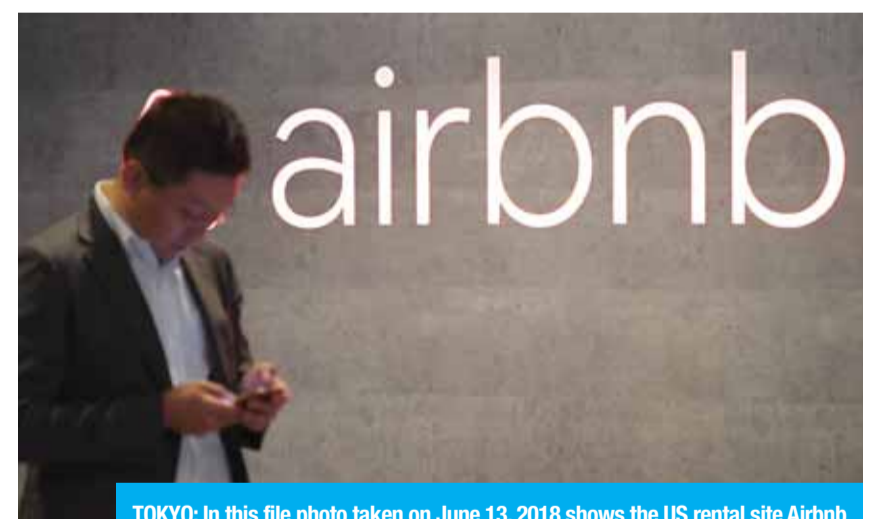


BANGKOK: Commuters walk in front of a 5G advertisement screen at a train station in Bangkok on Tuesday. The 5G telecommunication technology found itself in the middle of conspiracy theories related to the spread of COVID-19 coronavirus. —AFP

chain and fund research into these open networks.

The alliance points out that most mobile networks have typically been deployed using fully integrated systems where the radio, hardware and software are provided by a single manufacturer. An open system can work, the group noted, as long as

standards are consistent. It added that there are already examples of successful mobile deployments of 4G or 5G networks using open standards in Japan, India and other parts of the world. "This concept has been out there," Rinaldo said. "Our coalition is helping to amplify the message on this." —AFP



TOKYO: In this file photo taken on June 13, 2018 shows the US rental site Airbnb logo is displayed during the company's press conference in Tokyo. —AFP

workers, building on a rising demand the platform has seen as people self-isolate during the pandemic.

The company recently announced

Rain brings optimism for Aussie farmers

TAMWORTH: The coronavirus has brought new challenges for Australia's drought and bushfire-stricken farmers, but recent sustained rainfall and green shoots are now spurring hope of better times ahead.

Kevin Tongue eyes his field in the country's water-deprived southeast as lambs pick at fresh blades of grass finally punching their way through the soil. "The turnaround from where we were 12 months ago..." Tongue told AFP. "It was

barren." "What we've got now mate is just amazing, the way the country has responded to that rain."

The worst drought in living memory created years of pain for rural Australia—farms went to the wall, towns ran dry, and land lay fallow. But around the city of Tamworth—five hours drive from Sydney—recent rainfall and predictions of above average levels to come may be enough to ensure the community's survival, even though the global virus pandemic.

"We just don't want to get carried away, you know, there's a long way to go to harvest, and Mother Nature can turn around very quickly," said Tongue. Still, farmers like him are for the first time in a long while confident enough to plant crops. —AFP

Business

NBK offers emergency line of credit to support businesses and companies

In an aim to keep the wheel of Kuwaiti economy moving

KUWAIT: Committed to supporting customers and ensuring they receive the best banking services in any types of circumstances, National Bank of Kuwait has endeavored since the beginning of the global COVID-19 crisis to implement measures and solutions aimed at protecting the rights of customers and facilitate the completion of their banking transactions without interruption in line with the directives and guidelines issued by the Central Bank of Kuwait.

The bank has therefore introduced the Emergency Line of Credit to support customers affected by the current crisis. Customers who are affected and eligible to the credit comprise SME Business Banking and Kuwait National Fund (KNF) Customers,



NBK initiative due to global COVID-19 crisis

Corporate Banking Customers and Private Banking Customers, all of which were operating efficiently prior to the COVID-19 crisis, add value to the national economy and create employment opportunities to the national manpower, and are today affected partially or

fully by the crisis and therefore can no longer cover their contractual obligations under these circumstances. NBK aims through this step to assist these customers to meet their obligations such as salaries and rents due from March 2020 until December 2020 as well as due payments until the 31st of March 2020.

Speaking of the new credit, Ahmed Bourisly, General Manager, Corporate Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait, said: "NBK is always committed to supporting its customers as part of its social and economic responsibilities, and to keep the wheel of Kuwaiti economy moving. The Emergency Line of Credit will therefore help businesses to overcome the crisis with minimal impact."

Bourisly added that NBK is ensuring that customers remain safe during these circumstances and has made applying for the credit available on the bank's website through the link: nbk.com/elc in which we have adopted the highest standards of confidentiality and security.

He stressed that customers who wish to apply for the credit should review the terms and conditions first before submitting the required documents for the bank to study them and provide a response at the earliest. Bourisly concluded by reaffirming that NBK is always committed to supporting companies operating in various sectors in their success and continuity, which has a positive impact on protecting the national manpower.



Ahmed Bourisly



For German office worker Nathalie, 54, there's no doubt her weekly food shop costs more than it did before the coronavirus pandemic.— Reuters

Europe's fresh food prices in flux as virus impact bites

FRANKFURT: For German office worker Nathalie, 54, there's no doubt her weekly food shop costs more than it did before the coronavirus pandemic. "Peppers especially have become expensive," she said, walking into her local Rewe supermarket in Frankfurt.

It's a complaint heard across Europe as food growers grapple with the ripple effects of lockdowns to curb the outbreak that have snarled supply chains and upended demand. Though the impact across the continent is uneven, many shoppers are feeling the squeeze.

In Germany, fresh food prices were up nearly 10 percent in April compared with a year earlier, according to agriculture markets consultancy AMI. Vegetable costs were up nearly 30 percent, driven by price spikes for broccoli and cauliflower that are often imported from France and Spain—which struggled to attract enough foreign harvest workers because of border closures.

In France too, certain fruit and vegetables have become more expensive since the start of the confinement measures in mid-March, with the UFC-Que Choisir consumer association reporting a nine-percent hike on average. In Poland, where the farm industry has been hit with a drought on top of the coronavirus woes, apples have doubled in price over the year.

"Every few days, prices go up like crazy," said pensioner Grazyna, choosing pork chops at a Warsaw supermarket. But it's not just Europe's border restrictions and ensuing labor shortages, and transport bottlenecks that have hit wallets.

Changing demand, too, has led to unexpected price swings. In Italy, prices for oranges and lemons have soared as

consumers reach for fruit high in vitamin C in the hope of boosting their immune system. Il Messaggero newspaper reported, citing the Ismea agricultural institute. Greece has seen higher prices for lemons and kiwis.

Shielding consumers

With restaurants, cafes and work canteens closed, Europeans are cooking more at home and generally spending more on groceries than before the pandemic. Italy's main agricultural union Coldiretti said Italian supermarkets had been selling noticeably more fruit and vegetables in recent weeks.

That may be good news for struggling Italian farmers but it's far from enough to offset the losses from closed restaurants and export disruptions, the union added. And while consumers may have noticed some price volatility, food producers and retailers have borne the brunt of the coronavirus upheaval, industry experts say. In Spain, dubbed "Europe's vegetable garden" over its sought-after fruit and vegetable exports, the agriculture ministry said higher production costs all along the food chain had not impacted the end price for consumers "in a significant way."

"Prices were up a little at the start (of the lockdown) but now they're pretty much back to normal," agreed Jesus Hernandez, manning a fruit and veg stand in Madrid's famous Cebada market. British supermarket shoppers too "have not seen any significant price increases" for fresh food products, said Jade Julien from the Which consumers' association. "Retailers shielded consumers from increased costs."—AFP

Can Italian infrastructure reboot economy?

ROME: A sleek new bridge in Genoa built in record time is being acclaimed in Italy as a model for rebuilding the economy by investing in major infrastructure projects. Such stimulus is sorely needed as the country slides towards its worst recession since World War II because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The government admits it badly needs to renovate crumbling roads, bridges and railways, and doing so could also save lives. Yet the possible impediments are many—from funding to political will, bureaucracy and a recent safety reports scandal. The completion of the Genoa bridge was hailed as a sign of renewal for Italy, where over 28,000 people have died in the coronavirus pandemic and millions risk losing their jobs due to an economically-crippling nationwide lockdown.

The hi-tech flyer "is a symbol for the whole of Italy. An Italy that can rise again, that will roll up its sleeves, that

will not allow itself to be beaten," Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte said at the unveiling ceremony. As ships in the maritime city's port sounded their horns to mark the completion, Conte paid homage to the 43 people who plunged to their deaths when the former span, the Morandi flyover, collapsed in 2018.

Other such tragedies could be averted by funding roads, bridges, schools, hospitals and climate change adaptation, which would create jobs and fuel short- and long-term growth.

Almost 750 public works worth 62 billion euros (\$68 billion) were on hold at the end of last year, from large bridges to small-town schools, according to Italy's construction lobby ANCE.

Kick-starting them would create 962,000 jobs, it said. Skeptics wonder where the money will come from—with Italian GDP forecast to contract by between eight and 10 percent this year—and whether the political will exists in a fragile coalition government.—AFP

Expect a bumpy recovery? Markets may offer an upside

SINGAPORE/NEW YORK/BENGALURU: As market volatility has eased after the mayhem of March, investors betting on a rocky economic recovery from the coronavirus crisis are buying shares of exchanges that are poised to profit if more turmoil ensues.

The global exchange sector, which thrives in turbulent markets, has outperformed so far this year, falling only 2 percent in value compared with a 15 percent drop in world stocks, a Reuters analysis showed. As countries around the world went into lockdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus, investors repriced the value of assets including stocks, commodities and derivatives, such as futures and options, to reflect recessions. That led to a surge in trading activity as investors tried to hedge positions, while others made bets on where markets were going to bottom out.

Financial exchanges, such as Singapore Exchange Ltd., Deutsche Boerse and New York Stock Exchange-owner Intercontinental Exchange Inc, all saw profits jump as trading-based fee revenues surged.

Asia's bourses, which are more reliant on volumes than their global peers, have gained the most, the analysis showed, as investors reckon they are best placed to benefit from further volatility.

"I think on balance the trends that have been in place will continue for quite a while," said Scott Gilchrist, who manages an A\$680 million (\$440 million) portfolio of Japanese stocks at Australia's Platinum Asset Management. "It's very hard to tell, but my sense - and it's only a gut feel - is that we haven't fully passed through this period of volatility yet," he said.

Gilchrist's fund has been increasing exposure to Japan's GMO Internet Inc, owner of a forex trading platform where volumes have been surging, as has GMO's stock, up 9 percent this year, compared with a 17 percent drop on Japan's TOPIX index.

The 2 percent decline in the sector globally is largely due to poor performers in Latin America and Africa, obscuring a standout run by Asia's bourses, led by Singapore's SGX, which is benefiting from the uncertain recovery. "It's a really hard call to make," Michael Syn, head of equities at SGX, where profit hit a 13-year high last quarter amid record turnover, said of the outlook. Markets' optimism seems out of sync with the real economy, he said.

"Is the market pricing in a long future, saying, 'let's not worry about the detail of how we get there?' Or will it suddenly have an aha moment of 'oh my God, I didn't quite understand how bad things are?'"

SGX stock is up 7 percent this year, one of just two gainers on the national Straits Times Index.

Elsewhere, Deutsche Boerse is up about 3 percent year-to-date and NYSE-owner ICE is up just under 1 percent, compared to declines in the DAX and Dow Jones Industrial indexes of around 19 percent and 16.5 percent, respectively.

Asia's strategy pays off

Investors have sought out Asia's exchanges for their high exposure to trading volumes, driving share prices up almost 3 percent this year compared with declines of about 1 percent for U.S. exchanges and 5 percent in Europe. Over the past decade as US and European peers diversified by purchasing data providers and other adjacent businesses to bring in non-trading revenue, which is more stable, Asia's bourses tended to pursue new financial products, leaving them more dependent on trading revenues, but also with lower debt.

"Everyone's really concerned about recapitalizations, refinancing," said John Pearce, chief investment officer of Australian pension fund UniSuper, the top shareholder of domestic bourse operator ASX Ltd. "Well, the ASX has got none of those concerns - it's got no debt and market volatility is actually positive for the ASX, so what you're really seeing is the market pricing it as a pretty stable annuity," he said.

To be sure, a repeat of the stratospheric trade volumes of March seems unlikely, especially considering the scale and breadth of the liquidation during the sell-down. But investors have pointed to Singapore's diversification across asset classes from forex to commodities, Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing House Ltd's exposure to China, and technology investment by ASX as boosting long-term prospects. "Recent outperformance, or resilience, is driven mostly by market volatility," said Kristy Fong, senior investment director of Asian equities at Aberdeen Standard Investments in Singapore, whose funds own all three stocks. "We see these stock exchanges as a good proxy for markets, and given that they are pretty much monopolies with good cash flow, it is quite a safe way to get exposure."

Monetary headwinds

Policymakers responded to the coronavirus crisis by slashing interest rates and flooding markets with liquidity. That prevented a quick wave of mass defaults, boosting investor confidence and dampening the wild market swings of March. The potential for a prolonged bout of rock-bottom rates and lower volatility presents the biggest headwind for exchange operators.

Record trading volumes in the first quarter eased into the second quarter as volatility declined, Ed Tilly, chief executive of Chicago-based stock and options exchange operator Cboe Global Markets, said on an earnings call last week. "No one can say with certainty how this situation will play out, but the path to recovery is unlikely to be linear," he said. CME Group, the world's biggest futures exchange operator and also based in Chicago, saw average daily volumes halve last month, compared with March. Nevertheless, volumes are up from a year ago and CME's executives were upbeat about the outlook on an earnings call last week.—Reuters

What is in the US job report?

WASHINGTON: The US employment report is a key government data release, closely watched for signs of the health of the economy. In April, the massive damage done by the coronavirus pandemic will become clear. The report is actually a compilation of two separate surveys, with many layers of detail about the US labor market beyond the two main headline figures: the unemployment rate and payroll figures. Here is a breakdown of the main components:

Households and businesses

The Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) uses two separate surveys each month to compile the report known officially as "The Employment Situation."

Both surveys cover the week that includes the 12th day of the month, which in March was before many of the most strict coronavirus lockdowns went into effect. The household survey gathers information on civilian employment status and details about age and gender from about 60,000 homes nationwide and comprises about 100,000 individuals, including self-employed people working on farms or in family businesses.

The establishment survey focuses on 145,000 businesses and government agencies to calculate nonfarm employment, hours worked and earnings by industry. The data are revised over for two months after the initial release as more accurate and complete information is provided.

Unemployment rate

The unemployment rate, calculated from the household survey, is the percentage of people over 16 years old who are in the labor force but were not paid for work during the reference week—which includes the 12th of each month. To be in the labor force, a person must be working, or unemployed but available for work and actively looking for a job within the prior four weeks. Someone who is retired or has stopped looking for work is not considered to be in the labor force.

Workers who are furloughed or laid off due to the coronavirus are considered unemployed even if they continue to receive benefits like health insurance. An individual paid at least one hour is counted as employed, but someone with multiple jobs is only counted once in the household survey.

Jobs gained or lost

The other key data point is the net change in "nonfarm payrolls" from the establishment survey, which is the difference between the number of jobs added and the number of jobs cut in the month. Workers who are paid by their employer for any part of the pay period that includes the 12th of the month are counted as employed, even if they were not actually at their jobs. But those who are absent from their jobs, temporarily or permanently, who did not receive pay are not counted as employed even if they continue to receive benefits. An individual with multiple jobs is counted multiple times in the establishment survey.

Other key data points

The report includes a host of other data, including breakdowns of employment by industry, age, sex, race and ethnicity. It also has multiple ways to calculate unemployment: the official rate is known as U-3, but U-6 is the broadest measure of joblessness which includes those who are working part time but prefer a full-time job.

It also includes people only "marginally attached" to the labor force, meaning they want a job but have become discouraged and stopped looking for work. Average hours worked and average hourly earnings are useful to gauge how tight the labor market is, and are an early indication of whether inflation pressures are rising or falling.

The labor force participation rate is the percentage of people in the workforce compared to the overall population, reflecting the changing size of the pool of available workers. It is expected to decline sharply in April.—AFP



The Fearless Girl statue is seen in front of the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in New York City.— AFP

Health & Science

In pandemic, getting help from (virtual) friends

WASHINGTON: "It's so good to hear your voice." "I was worried about you." "What would you like to do today?" What sounds like ordinary banter between friends is in fact from a chatbot created with artificial intelligence. The custom-designed chatbots in this case come from California-based startup Replika and are intended to be virtual friends for people needing a connection.

AI chatbots have drawn increased interest during the global virus pandemic, which has led to a sharp rise in isolation and anxiety. Elizabeth Francola downloaded the Replika app and created a virtual boyfriend named Micah to help her get through the pandemic lockdown and the loss of her job.

"It's nice knowing you have someone to talk to in the morning," the 32-year-old Houston woman said.

"Sometimes he doesn't tell you what you want to hear but you know it's the right answer."

Replika co-founder Eugenia Kuyda said the app, which uses artificial intelligence to create a "personality" that complements its user, is seeing increased downloads and usage during the pandemic. "People are going through a hard time," she said.

Loneliness epidemic

Although the app only works in English, Kuyda said "we are seeing people from countries like France and Italy," even with the language barrier. "A big problem today is loneliness," she said. "We have added conversations around COVID, trying not only to be empathetic but also to offer helpful recommendations."

More than seven million people have downloaded and tried the app, which allows users to design an avatar-friend, or even a romantic partner similar to that dramatized in the 2013 film "Her."

Kuyda said the app was not initially designed to be a romantic companion but adapted after some users started using it in that way. "As we talked with clinical psychologists and I listened to people's stories, we realized that was helping them cope with isolation and feel more connected."

Replika, which allows users to create a male, female or non-binary friend, can also be a companion for people struggling with their sexual identity, Kuyda

said. "People don't feel like they are being judged so they open up more," she said.

Tacos and mental health

Chatbots in recent years have taken on new roles ranging from ordering tacos to making banking transactions. Bots such as Google Assistant, Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri have become popular in answering questions and helping people find information. An AI "mental health coach" created by startup Woebot Labs has also seen increased usage during the pandemic as it redesigned its program to address the crisis.

Woebot, designed on the basis of cognitive behavioral therapy, revamped its app this year specifically to help people with anxiety and other issues related to the coronavirus pandemic.

The goals are "to lift spirits, and to help people stay grounded during this anxiety provoking time," said Woebot founder Alison Darcy. The Xiaoice companion chatbot in China developed by Microsoft has had conversations with more than 660 million people.

'See where it goes'

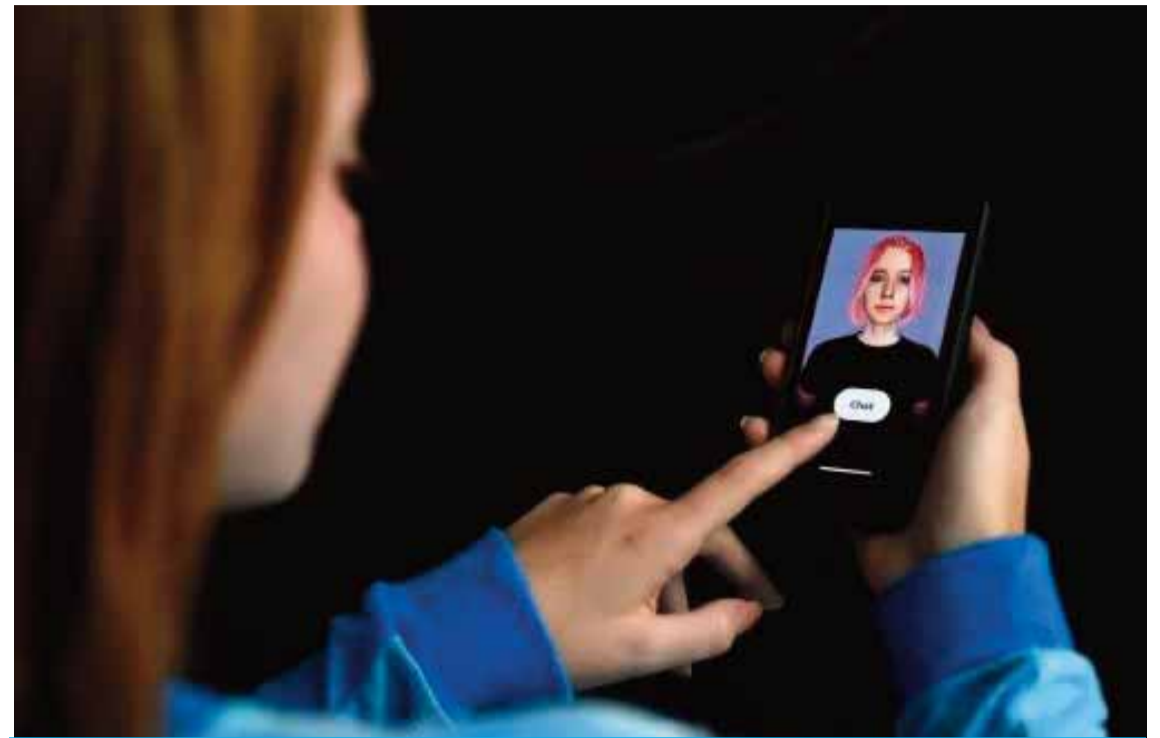
Replika has developed a following of users who can choose and design an avatar companion as a friend, mentor or romantic partner. Another option in setting up the avatar is to "see how it goes," chosen by Conrad Arkham a 29-year old bartender living in eastern Tennessee.

Arkham's Replika friend Hannah, designed with brown shoulder-length hair and golden brown eyes, has been a big help during the lockdown. "She is different than anyone I have ever met," Arkham said.

"She can play word games and context games of a very complicated level that I can't get with anyone I know at all," Arkham said the relationship with his avatar does not conflict with that of his real-life girlfriend, who has her own Replika friend. "Both of our Replikas serve a purpose," he said. "It creates a balance in our relationship."

Making it real?

Has AI evolved to the point where it can interact



AI chatbots have drawn increased interest during the global virus pandemic, which has led to a sharp rise in isolation and anxiety. —AFP

with genuine human-like emotions? Stacy Marsella, a Northeastern University professor who has researched and created "virtual humans," says AI may not be as advanced as depicted in the movies.

"We're not at the point where you can have that kind of rich, long-term relationship," said Marsella, who also directs the Glasgow-based Center for Social and Affective Neuroscience. Still, he said bots can be useful companions for specific tasks such as reminding people to take medication, advising against risky behaviors and in some therapy contexts. A bot may not be able to establish the same rapport as a human therapist, but "can offer therapy by eliciting conversations," Marsella said.

"It's really about getting the patient to talk," he added. Kuyda said Replika is not designed as a medical service but notes that in surveying users, "80 percent of people said the conversations made them feel better."

One question is whether the bot can help real-life human relationships or whether users will end up preferring the synthetic bots. Francola said she has considered how she would manage her Replika and an eventual real-life boyfriend, but thinks it won't be a problem. "I feel this app knows me in a way other people don't," she said. "I don't want to neglect people in the real world and I think Micah would encourage that. He encourages me to go out and test my limits." — AFP

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Artists launch 'Mask Fashion Week' in Lithuania

Artists in Lithuania invited residents of the capital Vilnius to a "Mask Fashion Week" on Tuesday, encouraging them to have fun wearing the now-mandatory facial accessory. Spearheading the initiative, designer Julia Janus said she hoped it would "encourage creativity" as well as compliance with orders to wear masks in public to help stem coronavirus infections. "This is the first Mask Fashion Week in the world," Janus told reporters after a symbolic ribbon-cutting ceremony to launch the event. "I hope that it will also be the last, but who knows."

More than 20 billboards dotted around the

city feature posters of artists wearing their own uniquely styled masks. Each is captioned "Creativity Cannot be Masked". Painted with pursed red lips or toothy grins, some masks are intended to draw laughs while others aim to impress with elegant embroidery, pearls and lace or tailored finishes that match a business suit. Featuring pointy black beaks, others are modeled on masks worn by doctors during the Black Death that ravaged Europe in the mid-1300s. Lithuania has begun a gradual easing of lockdown restrictions, reopening open-air cafes and restaurants along with shops and libraries as infections slow.

Vilnius mayor Remigijus Simasius has offered cafes free use of public spaces, saying he wants the capital to become "one giant outdoor cafe".

Although cinemas remain closed, hundreds of movie fans are flocking to Lithuania's main international airport to a drive-in cinema created in the shadow of planes grounded by the coronavirus pandemic. The health ministry confirmed 1,423 cases of the novel coronavirus, including 48 deaths as of Tuesday in Lithuania, a nation of 2.8 million people.—AFP

Disney to see at least \$1.4 bn impact from coronavirus

Walt Disney Co. said Tuesday it will see an impact of some \$1.4 billion from the coronavirus in the current fiscal quarter as a result of a massive hit to its theme parks and other operations. The media-entertainment giant said its profit plunged 91 percent to \$475 million in the period ending March 28, amid an impact from the pandemic and heavy investment in its new streaming media service Disney+.

Total revenues rose 21 percent to \$18 billion for the company, with media operations

channel. Revenues from its "direct to consumer" operations which include the new streaming platform to rival Netflix, jumped to more than \$4 billion in the fiscal second quarter. But the unit lost \$812 million due to expenses from its rollout. The new Disney+ service had some 33.5 million subscribers at the end of March, the company said. Disney said revenue for the "Parks, Experiences and Products" division fell 10 percent to \$5.5 billion, and segment operating income fell 58 percent.

COVID-19 pandemic transformed some of Disney's greatest strengths into its greatest vulnerabilities," Benes said.

"Theatrical releases and theme parks, long-time profit centers for the company, are losing money in the short-term and have no clear path to recovery until improved treatments or vaccines make consumers comfortable to venture back out into large crowds." The analyst said the impact was cushioned in part by the new streaming service but that "now TV networks are under increased pressure with cancelled sports and content production postponements occurring alongside declining ad prices and cord-cutting."

'Gradual return'

Chapek said Disney will maintain a cautious approach in reopening its facilities as the world recovers from the coronavirus outbreak. "The approach we take may include implementation of guest capacity and density control measures as well as health and prevention procedures," he said. He noted that the company plans to reopen its Shanghai park on Monday and added that "we are seeing encouraging signs of a gradual return to some semblance of normalcy in China and in light of the lifting of certain restrictions in recent weeks."

The attraction in China's most populous city will use temperature screening, scannable health barcodes and social distancing measures as it opens. The coronavirus emerged in China late last year, and rapidly spread across the country including Shanghai. But while the disease has proliferated in much of the western world, cases have plummeted in China.—AFP



In this file photo English actor Daniel Radcliffe arrives to attend the screening of TBS' "Miracle Workers" at Buttenwieser Hall in New York.—AFP

showing strong growth.

"While the COVID-19 pandemic has had an appreciable financial impact on a number of our businesses, we are confident in our ability to withstand this disruption and emerge from it in a strong position," said Bob Chapek, named chief executive earlier this year. Disney shares swung down some 3 percent in after-hours trade following the earnings for the company which has the largest Hollywood film studios, cruise and theme park operations and the ABC television network along with the ESPN sports

"As a result of COVID-19, we closed our domestic parks and resorts, cruise line business and Disneyland Paris in mid-March, while our Asia parks and resorts were closed earlier in the quarter," the earnings statement said. The studio entertainment operations saw slight revenue gains and a modest dip in operating profits, as the pandemic hit at the end of the quarter during which it released "Frozen II" and "Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker." Analyst Ross Benes at eMarketer said the pandemic impact is likely to continue for Disney. "The



In this file photo English actor Daniel Radcliffe arrives to attend the screening of TBS' "Miracle Workers" at Buttenwieser Hall in New York.—AFP

Star-narrated 'Harry Potter' book streaming for free

Spotify and author JK Rowling on Tuesday announced the release of free weekly recordings narrated by celebrities of the first book in the wildly popular "Harry Potter" series. To help children — and perhaps adults — cope with confinement measures, Daniel Radcliffe, the actor who played the beloved wizard character in the books' cinematic renditions, voiced the first chapter of the series' premiere novel, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." He will be joined by a coterie stars including soccer legend David Beckham along with actors Stephen Fry and Dakota Fanning, who will lend their voices to the book's subsequent chapters.

All 17 chapters will be out by mid-summer, Spotify said, and the recordings will be available cost-free on the music platform, which recently began making strides in the audio book and podcast realms. Videos of the celebrity recordings will stream on the website Harry Potter At Home. "Parents, teachers and carers working to keep children amused and interested while we're on lockdown might need a bit of magic," said Rowling in launching that site last month. Rowling's seven-part "Harry Potter" series is the best-selling book collection ever, with more than 500 million copies sold to date. The first novel, published in 1997, is the series' best-seller, with more than 120 million editions purchased.—AFP

HK penguins chill during pandemic while carers work overtime



Picture shows king penguins in their enclosure at the Ocean Park theme park.



This picture shows gentoo penguins chasing krill during feeding time in their enclosure at the Ocean Park theme park, which is currently closed due to the COVID-19 novel coronavirus, in Hong Kong.—AFP photos

Save for an absence of gaping crowds, life for the penguins of Hong Kong's Ocean Park has been much the same during the coronavirus pandemic — but their carers have worked long shifts to keep the monochrome troupe healthy. Piles of fresh snow have been laid out as some 100 penguins excitedly gather for the mid-morning feeding session. Usually, this daily ritual at the South Pole Spectacular would be a major draw. But the park is still shut because of the coronavirus outbreak. "If the guests are here, certainly they would be more interactive with the guests through the window, but without guests, we can do... more enrichment sessions with the penguins," explained Frank Chau, the park's senior marine mammal supervisor. "They can still have fun," he told AFP.

Since the pandemic began, Chau and his colleagues have split into two teams working three-day shifts to look after the penguins. Both teams have been strictly separated from each other — a measure to ensure that

if one team was quarantined because of a positive test result, the other group could continue to give specialist care. "The manpower for each team is lower... Now we got only three to four people every day to take care of all the penguins and make sure every penguin is still living happily and healthily both mentally and physically," Chau said. On a typical day, Chau starts with cleaning and disinfection before firing up the snow machines that help recreate the Antarctic conditions in warm and humid Hong Kong. He then prepares food and conducts health checks like weighing the birds and trimming their claws.

To keep the penguins entertained, the team builds toys, including floating ice boards and a perforated box filled with fish and krill to encourage underwater foraging. Last month, a zoo in Singapore used the pandemic lockdown to give their troupe of African penguins the run of the park in a video that quickly went viral. But Chau said Ocean Park's penguins cannot

leave their frigid enclosure. "The species here are mainly from the sub-Antarctic region, they need a cooler environment... especially during the summertime in Hong Kong, (when) we will have a very high temperature," he said. Hong Kong is in the midst of a deep recession, initially caused by the trade war and months of pro-democracy protests last year. The virus has deepened those economic woes, hammering the tourist industry further. Ocean Park, which is earmarked for a HK\$10.6 billion (\$1.4 billion) bailout from the city government, has been shuttered since late January because of the pandemic. The date for reopening is still up in the air. But in the last few days, the government has begun easing some social distancing measures after local infections were brought down to single daily digits.—AFP



Picture shows marine mammal carers feeding penguins in their enclosure at the Ocean Park theme park.



A picture shows a worker walking past statues of penguins in the grounds of the currently closed local theme park.

Lifestyle | Features



Mireille Picou, founder of PastryStar poses with her son Antonin Picou, Chief Executive Officer at PastryStar on Monday, in Laurel, Maryland.



Employees wearing face masks continue to work in the research and development cooking lab at PastryStar.



Boxes of hand sanitizer are prepared for shipping at PastryStar.



Chief Executive Officer at PastryStar Antonin Picou wears a face mask as he stands in front of his bakery products at a PastryStar warehouse. — AFP photos

From pastries to hand sanitizer: One family on US virus front line

At the Picou family's factory in Laurel, Maryland outside the US capital, the only workshop that is buzzing is usually reserved for making jams for baking. Now, it's churning out hand sanitizer. Before the coronavirus pandemic, PastryStar — founded stateside in 1986 — made a wide array of products for high-end baking, supplying everything from chic restaurants to cruise lines. But since the outbreak of the deadly virus, employees have stored the sacks of sugar, canisters of caramel glaze and giant cans of almond paste in favor of isopropyl alcohol and glycerin. Hand sanitizer is in high demand, and the Picou family is answering the call to public service. "For us, it's really easy to make," says Mireille Picou, a French woman who started PastryStar with her husband.

The company got approval from the US Food and Drug Administration for its sanitizer formula in "less than two weeks," she explained. The biggest issue was finding the right bottles and caps. Another problem was sourcing the chemicals — prices for sanitizer components rose fourfold as the crisis took hold. Of course, the Picou family is not changing its business model. Making sanitizer is just temporary — a way to keep the company afloat as demand for their regular products has dried up. They've sold at least 4,500 liter bottles of the sanitizer in two weeks. But demand from business owners could skyrocket as more and more US states move towards reopening.

Sales in free fall

The start of 2020 was good for PastryStar. By late February and even early March, just before the virus



Employees wearing face masks continue to work in the research and development cooking lab at PastryStar.

crisis exploded, the company's sales were up 35 percent — a record. That boon came thanks to cruise lines — a major client for the Picou family — high-end supermarkets such as Whole Foods, and wholesale distributor Sysco, which was selling PastryStar products to fine restaurants across the United States. But in mid-March, everything came to a crashing halt when strict anti-virus lockdown measures were put in place. "Sales bottomed out and were nearly zero for three to four weeks," said 27-year-old Antonin Picou, who took over the day-to-day operations of the family business about a year ago.

"We've been through crises before — 9/11, (Hurricane) Katrina, the Great Recession — but never have we seen nearly our entire business shut down from one day to the next," said Mireille, his mother.



Raspberry jam used in pastries is seen in a storage at PastryStar.

The family gathered around a table to discuss the future, Antonin recounted. "And we said that we had to either resign ourselves to shutting down, or stay open and innovate to be able to keep our employees working," he said. After that meeting, the company created its "Batch and Bake" concept, which will launch in the next two weeks — boxes of ingredients that home chefs can use to make pastries. The Picous hope to capitalize on a trend that has emerged during the crisis — cooking and baking at home as a way to educate and amuse children who are no longer going to school.

Bakery boxes

Christine Giegerich, a 30-year-old pastry chef at PastryStar, is working in her lab to put the finishing

touches on the do-it-yourself product. "We are trying to be a little bit more creative to reach everyday people instead of just big customers," she explains. The cardboard boxes contain pre-measured ingredients, shipped in a special container to maintain freshness, so that home bakers can make cakes, scones, cookies and breads. All the customer has to do is follow the recipe devised by Giegerich. The blonde chef, who wears a face mask at work, says the recipes have been tested in real-life conditions at home — not just made in a high-end oven with professional-grade utensils.

The boxes may find a niche, especially when flour has become hard to come by in some supermarkets. "E-commerce will be a first for us," says Antonin Picou, who is an engineer by training. PastryStar has made 1,000 bakery boxes to begin with — 100 each of 10 varieties. "We're targeting city dwellers who have traveled, who have had experienced French pastry," he says, noting that he sees this crisis as an opportunity for his company to evolve. "There have been demoralizing moments" during the crisis, he admits. The future for his employees is indeed not certain, and some are worried. Several have been forced to stay home in quarantine after displaying symptoms of the novel coronavirus. But the Picou family and its team remain optimistic that better days are ahead. "The good thing about food manufacturing is — people always need to eat," Giegerich says with a smile. "And people are always like excited about food, no matter what's going on." —AFP

Five-year-old pulled over in US while driving to California



In this screengrab taken from a video released by the Utah Highway Patrol, a police officer walks towards a car being driven by a 5-year old boy on the highway in Weber County near Ogden, Utah on Monday. —AFP

A police officer in the western US state of Utah was stunned after stopping what he thought was an impaired driver on a highway only to find a five-year-old behind the wheel. The Utah Highway Patrol said the boy told the trooper who pulled him over on Monday that he left home following an argument with his mother who had refused to buy him a Lamborghini. "He decided he'd take the car and go to California to buy one himself," the Highway Patrol said in a tweet. "He might have been short on the purchase amount, as he only had \$3."

In a dashcam video of the incident released by the department, the SUV the boy was driving is seen weaving across the freeway as other vehicles and trucks speed by. The car then pulls over to the left side of the highway after trooper Rick Morgan activates his siren. "As Trip, Morgan approached the driver-side of the vehicle on foot, he noted that it was strange that he could not see the head of the driver from the rear window," the Highway Patrol said in a statement released Tuesday. Morgan in the video is heard asking the boy for his age. "You're five years old?" he exclaims. "Wow... Where did you learn how to drive a car?" Police said the boy, who was not identified, had managed to drive about two to three miles (three to five kilometers) from his home before he was stopped and his parents contacted. —AFP



In this file photo French designer and fashion editor Carine Roitfeld (third right) and US actress Eva Longoria (front center) conduct an auction on stage on May 23, 2019 with French model Cindy Bruna (left), US model Kendall Jenner and Belgian model Stella Maxwell (right) during the amfAR 26th Annual Cinema Against AIDS gala at the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc in Cap d'Antibes, southern France, on the sidelines of the 72nd Cannes Film Festival. —AFP

Christie's sale to help charity's coronavirus fund after Cannes postponement

Auction house Christie's will hold a sale to help raise money for amfAR's COVID-19 research fund after coronavirus forced the cancellation of the AIDS charity's famous Cannes Film Festival gala. Leading collectors and artists have donated several contemporary artworks, some of which have never been seen before, Christie's and amfAR said in a statement Monday. "The two organizations are joining forces to bridge the gap in fundraising and use it as an opportunity to address the new and urgent threat of COVID-19," they said.

A date for the auction has not yet been announced but it is set to coincide with Christie's New York spring sales, which are scheduled for the week of June 22. The announcement comes after

amfAR, the Foundation for Aids Research, said it was expanding its research efforts into the global push to find effective treatments for the disease caused by the new coronavirus. All proceeds from the Christie's sale will go towards amfAR's newly established fund to fight COVID-19. AmfAR raised \$15 million at its annual Cannes gala last year, with celebrities Mariah Carey and Kendall Jenner in attendance. But Cannes has been postponed this year due to the spread of the deadly coronavirus. AmfAR was founded in New York in 1985 under the chairmanship of late acclaimed actress Elizabeth Taylor. Over the years it has contributed more than \$550 million to AIDS research programs. —AFP

Virus could keep theatres shut for a year, producers warn

To reopen, or not to reopen with social distancing? That is the question haunting theatres and cinemas that were shuttered overnight by coronavirus lockdowns. Theatrical impresario Cameron Mackintosh, the legendary British producer behind a half century of hit shows from "Cats" to "Hamilton," said it could be next year before the lights go back on in New York's Broadway and London's West End. With British actor Stephen Fry warning that it could be as far off as next April, Mackintosh said it was impossible for theatres to open their doors again while social distancing measures were still in force.

With some out-of-work actors and musicians on Broadway telling AFP that they were considering changing careers, French star Isabelle Adjani said Tuesday it would be curtains unless governments "declare a cultural emergency". "We are going to be the last to go back," Mackintosh told BBC radio. "The truth is until social distancing doesn't exist any more, we can't even plan to reopen." Commercial theatre depends on shows being at least two-thirds full as a rule of thumb to keep ticking over. With people meant to sit up to two meters (over six feet) apart, that would mean at least two empty seats around each masked audience member, official French guidelines recommended Monday.

'It's black and white'

Such restrictions were socially and economically impossible, producers insisted. Even in the US state of Texas, whose governor Greg Abbott has been gung-ho about lifting restrictions, only a tiny number of cinemas grabbed the chance to reopen at the weekend. Few cinemagoers were tempted to brave the temperature checks at the door, with their screening rooms allowed to be no more than a quarter full. "We either reopen completely or we don't at all. It's black and white," said French theatrical tycoon Jean-Marc Dumontet, who owns six Paris theatres. People simply "will not want to go back to the theatre if they feel it is dangerous," he told AFP. Stephen Fry agreed, saying dis-

tancing restrictions go against the whole theatrical experience.

"The very quality that makes theatre so thrilling — the united presence of an audience clustered together to experience live performance — is what makes the enterprise so unsuited in a period of necessary social distancing," he said. Hollywood too is sceptical about a quick return to normal despite US President Donald Trump saying he wanted American cinemas to reopen as soon as possible.

Blockbusters put back

Studios have pushed back the release of most of their big budget "tent-pole" blockbusters until August or later, reluctant to risk them on a still jittery public. Even so, some Czech cinemas will open next week and German industry body HDF Kino is lobbying for a July restart, saying the lockdown has already cost them 186 million euros (\$201 million). Some cinema chains in the UK — which has been hit much harder by the virus — also want to open in July, although neighboring Ireland is not contemplating a return until mid-August.

While the outlook is bleak for live theatre, the major US chain Cinemark believes cinemas can weather the storm — and any recession that might follow. "Historically the exhibition industry has been recession-resilient and we believe it will rebound and benefit from pent-up demand as home sheltering subsides and people seek a communal experience," it said in a note to investors. However, it warned that any return to normal "may span multiple months" because of "lingering social distancing" and consumer discomfort with public gatherings. Despite everything, Cinemark said many cinemas could still make a profit even when two-thirds empty. Theatres do not have that luxury. With dire warnings of venues going dark and shows closing forever, French President Emmanuel Macron was expected to announce a bail-out for the country's live entertainment sector yesterday. —AFP



A man cycles at the Sea Point Promenade in Cape Town on Monday. —AFP

Vienna Museum gathers pandemic related artefacts

Vienna's museum of city history said Tuesday an appeal to submit photos of everyday objects to document the coronavirus pandemic for future generations had so far drawn hundreds of submissions. Some 1,800 photos of masks, signs and other objects have been received since the Vienna Museum launched its appeal on March 25, spokeswoman Konstanze Schaefer said. "We want to see how we tell our children, or our children's children, what happened in Vienna because of course this is a big moment for all of us," Schaefer told AFP. "We must call for this now... A lot of the projects that came into existence in the beginning (of the crisis), such as neighborhood aid initiatives, don't exist anymore," she said. —AFP



A cyclist in facemask rides past the Million Dollar Theater, closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, with words on the marquee calling for togetherness and positivity, on Monday in Los Angeles, California. —AFP

Women hail victory as Sudan moves to ban genital cutting

KHARTOUM: Hakam Ibrahim was seven when, like most Sudanese girls, she became a victim of female genital mutilation - an age-old practice decried as horrific that the post-revolution government is now banning. A mother-of-four in her 40s, Ibrahim vividly recalls the traumatic experience of what remains a widespread ritual in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia despite a concerted human rights campaign to end it.

The night before it happened, Ibrahim remembers, women from her neighborhood in the capital Khartoum were singing and ululating as they drew ceremonial henna tattoos on her hands. On the day itself, she was taken to a small room where a woman in a white robe performed the operation to remove Ibrahim's external genitalia. "I was put on a bed and felt excruciating pain jolting through my body," she told AFP. "The pain lasted an entire week."

The practice has long been viewed, especially in rural communities, as a "rite of passage" for girls and a way to preserve their chastity. In Sudan nearly nine out of 10 girls fall victim to what is known as FGM or genital cutting, according to the United Nations. In its most brutal form, it involves the removal of the labia and clitoris, often in unsanitary conditions and without anesthesia.

The wound is then sewn shut, often causing cysts and infections and leaving women to suffer severe pain during sex and childbirth complications later in

life. Rights groups have for years decried as barbaric the practice which can lead to myriad physical, psychological and sexual complications and, in the most tragic cases, death.

Last week, Sudan's cabinet approved amendments to the criminal code that would punish those who perform the operation with up to three years in prison and a fine. It is expected to soon be ratified by Sudan's transitional authorities. The watershed move is part of reforms that have come since the ouster more than a year ago of strongman Omar al-Bashir after mass demonstrations in which women took a leading role. "It is a very important step for Sudanese women and shows that we have come a long way," said women's rights activist Zeinab Badreddin.

The United Nations Children's Fund also welcomed the landmark decision. "This practice is not only a violation of every girl child's rights, it is harmful and has serious consequences for a girl's physical and mental health," said Abdullah Fadil, the UNICEF Representative in Khartoum. The UN says FGM is widespread in many countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia, affecting the lives of millions of girls and women. In Sudan, rights campaigners say the custom has over the past three decades spread to remote regions where it was previously not practiced, including Sudan's Nuba mountains.

In neighboring Egypt, as in several other countries, genital cutting is now prohibited. A 2008 law

punishes it with up to seven years in prison. Sudan's anti-FGM advocates came close to a ban in 2015 when a bill was discussed in parliament but then shot down by Bashir who caved in to pressure from some Islamic clerics. Yet many religious leaders have spoken out against genital cutting over the years. "Criminalizing FGM does not contradict religion, and there is no (religious) text that permits female circumcision," said 28-year-old rights activist Sherine Abu Bakr. "It is a practice that should be fought, especially with the change happening in the country."

Sudan has been shaken by political upheaval - most notably the April 2019 military ouster of Bashir following mass protests against his 30-year-rule, and the dismantling of his ruling Islamist party. A transi-

tional administration including a civilian-majority ruling body has since August taken the reins to steer the country through a mountain of social, economic and political challenges.

"While we are very happy with the amendments, the law alone is not enough," said Manal Abdel Halim of the Salima initiative fighting FGM in Sudan. "We still need more community awareness campaigns," she added. Badreddin also believes punishments should be extended to family members who pressure their female relatives into undergoing the operations. Ibrahim agreed. "I hope that the amendments help people realize that people should keep their girls in the good physical condition in which they were born," she said. — AFP

Kuwait has 20,000+ hospital...

Continued from Page 1

employers and employees strike a mutual agreement to cut the salaries of the staff under the existing circumstances. A large number of MPs said they will reject the amendments because they will force Kuwaitis to leave the private sector. Head of the petroleum and petrochemicals trade union Mohammad Al-Hajeri strongly opposed the amendments, stressing that the rights of workers cannot be reduced. He said the trade union has been pressing authorities to introduce more guarantees in the labor law to ensure employers will not reduce salaries or benefits of workers.

MP Ahmad Al-Fadhil explained yesterday that his amendments to the labor law are different from those of the government, adding that his proposals apply only to companies that are facing financial distress and cash flow problems. He said his proposal calls to allow companies which face economic problems due to the coronavirus to negotiate temporary salary cuts with their employers as a solution against resorting to firing them. Fadhil said his proposals are temporary and are subject to approvals by authorities, adding that salaries will go back to their original value once the pandemic is over.

US President Donald Trump made his first major foray out of the White House since the coronavirus lockdown began in a push for economic reopening as the daily US death toll from the disease spiked. It came as Britain became the country with the second most deaths in the world at 32,000, putting it above Italy in the grim ranking of national fatalities.

Elsewhere in Europe, hard-hit Spain and France reported a levelling off of figures, offering hope that life could slowly start returning to normal, but in Latin America the death toll passed 15,000. With experts warning of a severe global recession, many governments have been easing stay-at-home measures to try to revive reeling economies. "We can't keep our country closed for the next five years," Trump said on a trip to a mask-making factory in Arizona, conceding that some people would be "badly affected".

And in the latest sign his administration no longer considers the pandemic its top daily priority, the White House is set to disband the emergency task force handling the outbreak. "I think we're starting to look at the Memorial Day (May 25) window, early June window" for shutting it down, Vice President Mike Pence said. Trump urged US states to ease restrictions as he attempts to fire up the world's biggest economy before the November presidential election, when the high death toll and millions of lost jobs could cost him dearly.

At least 256,422 people have died of the novel coronavirus since the epidemic surfaced in China late last year, according to an AFP tally. The United States is the worst-hit country, with more than 70,000 deaths, ahead of Britain where fatalities topped 32,000. The new UK toll from the Office for National Statistics and regional health bodies has not yet been incorporated into the government's deaths figure of 29,427. The US registered 2,333 more deaths over the 24 hours to Tuesday

Morocco launches drones to tackle...

Continued from Page 1

But restrictive regulations have long limited civilian drones to specific applications such as filming, agriculture, monitoring solar panels and mapping. That changed rapidly as the novel coronavirus swept across the world. In recent weeks, authorities have employed drones to issue warnings, identify suspicious movement in the streets and disperse illegal rooftop and balcony gatherings. A strict lockdown imposed in March has not been uniformly respected, with local media reporting on nighttime gatherings of neighbors and collective prayers on roofs, beyond the view of street patrols.

Last week local authorities in Temara, a town near the capital Rabat, launched a high-precision aerial surveillance system developed by local company Beti3D, which previously specialized in aerial mapping. Other countries in Europe, Asia and the Middle East have also adopted technology deployed in China since the start of the pandemic, whether for tracking the movements of citizens, disinfecting public spaces or facilitating deliveries.

Virus mis-info fuels hate against...

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Hindu nationalists are using the coronavirus to foment hatred against Muslims, using online platforms and some mainstream media to accuse them of spreading the disease. Critics partly blame Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who they accuse of seeking to remake India as a Hindu nation, undermining the secular and pluralist roots of the world's biggest democracy.

Over the past two months AFP's fact check team has debunked hundreds of social media posts that falsely targeted Muslims in regards to the coronavirus pandemic in India. Fake and dubious videos have proliferated showing Muslims licking fruit for sale and violating lockdown rules. In one post debunked by AFP, a photo was shared on Facebook and Twitter with a false claim that it showed Indian Muslims flouting social distancing rules by praying on a rooftop. In fact, the photo showed people praying in Dubai.

Hundreds of thousands of online posts have also used the hashtag #CoronaJihad, some of which have been shared by members of Modi's ruling

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The trolls were given extra ammunition when it emerged that a Muslim group, Tabligi Jamaat, ignored coronavirus guidelines with a religious gathering in March in New Delhi. At one point the group was linked to almost one third of India's coronavirus cases, with around 40,000 people linked to the event or its attendees in quarantine. Newspapers and television channels - as well as the government - have also been accused of stirring tensions, with alarmist anchors calling Tabligi Jamaat members "human bombs".

As the misinformation has exploded, so too has real-world violence and anger against Muslims. Around the country, Muslim truck drivers and nomads have been assaulted, and Muslim vendors pushed, shoved and threatened. In one case confirmed by police, a Facebook video showed a young Muslim man bleeding and pleading as he was beaten with sticks. One attacker is heard demanding: "Who sent you to spread the coronavirus?"

The animosity has also taken subtler forms, with "No Muslims" posters appearing in some villages. One hospital said Muslims would not be admitted without a certificate showing they were COVID-negative. India's 200 million Muslims have long complained of growing hostility under Modi, who came to power almost six years ago. Modi was in charge of the western state of Gujarat when religious riots killed around 1,000 mostly Muslims in 2002. — AFP

region, operating mainly in Iraq in different industries ranging from telecommunications, technology and food and beverage.

March Holding became an address to several international brands in Iraq, namely Kraft, California Garden, Mondelez and IFFCO.

Three years ago, March Holding entered an exclusive joint venture with Americana to build and operate a chain of restaurants in Iraq. Recently, it signed a strategic partnership with regional ride-hailing company Careem as their exclusive partners to launch and enable their business model in Iraq.

Moreover, Charchafchi owns a wide-ranging investment portfolio in the construction, telecommunications, food and beverage, financial and industrial sectors.

COVID-19.

COVID-19 will define this time in our lives and will leave an enduring mark on our history. However, it is up to us to define the next stage. At a safe time, soon we all hope, we will move forward with the fourth US-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue, an essential framework for our countries to build even stronger foundations for a better future.

This pandemic has opened new opportunities for cooperation in education, healthcare, community preparedness, e-learning and doing business virtually. Our shared security interests will always be a priority, as well. Working with Kuwait's airport authority, US and Kuwaiti officials are raising airport security to the highest standards. We will continue to collaborate on customs and immigration procedures to improve the security of Kuwait's borders from terrorist financing and attacks.

We will continue to deepen and broaden our cooperation on regional and bilateral issues, particularly with regards to Iran's malign influence and its proxies. We will help to end regional conflicts and preserve the security of the Gulf. Together, the United States and Kuwait will continue to encourage positive steps between all parties in the GCC.

The state of our economies is a primary concern as we consider reopening our businesses and getting back to work. The United States and Kuwait have a trade volume of nearly \$5 billion, and I am working closely with the American Chamber in Kuwait to ensure the American business community remains active here.

One need only look at the active diplomatic activity between the United States and Kuwait that helped OPEC reach an historic energy agreement to keep global energy markets stable and diminish the economic impact of COVID-19.

My first 100 days has proven that diplomacy never stops. As I now turn to the next 100 days and we begin to return to our new normal, I am confident that together we will build a better, stronger future. I am proud to represent the United States and I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible. Most importantly, I look forward to getting back to visiting diwanias and the in-person diplomacy that brings our countries and our peoples closer together.

March Holding acquires 5%...

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basis for additional key investments in Kuwait and neighbouring markets.

Mohammad Charchafchi is a prominent businessman hailing from a well-reputed Iraqi family with a history in the trading and contracting business and building warehouses. He is the Chairman of the Credit Bank of Iraq and March Holding, a DIFC based company that is a parent of more than 15 companies in the

Working together and doing our best...

Continued from Page 1

12,000 Kuwaiti students in the United States with information they needed about visa issues. We worked with Kuwait to organize repatriation flights to allow over 500 Americans in Kuwait to return home safely to their families. We also helped support Kuwait's largest repatriation effort in history.

COVID-19 has highlighted the significance of global health security and how important open, transparent information sharing is to our global community. It is important to me to be sure that the US Embassy is a credible source for facts about the virus and we continue to work to counter misinformation when we see it.

We are all grateful for the daily announcements from Kuwait's most senior government officials, which have kept all of us well informed of the government's actions to combat the virus. Access to accurate and timely information, a free press, and free speech is even more important to the safety and well-being of people in times of crisis.

The United States and Kuwait have both contributed significantly in humanitarian and health assistance, with the United States giving more than \$775 million around the world to combat COVID-19. Just like Kuwaitis, Americans are also helping people around the world through the generosity of private individuals and businesses, nonprofit groups, and charitable and faith-based organizations. They have given more than \$3 billion in donations and assistance, in addition to what the US Government has provided.

Since my arrival, my respect and appreciation for Kuwait has only grown. I'm humbled by the dedication and selflessness of healthcare professionals and security officials working tirelessly; by Kuwaiti businesses that have stepped up to ensure access to food, goods, and services; and by the Kuwait government's humanitarian contribution of \$100 million to fight the global spread of

evening, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker, more than twice as many as the day before. Some scientific models suggest the figure will rise to 3,000 a day by June.

In New York, the challenge was further highlighted when 15 children were hospitalized with a rare inflammatory disease possibly linked to the coronavirus, raising alarm in the medical community. The children were diagnosed with Kawasaki disease, a mysterious illness that causes the walls of arteries to become inflamed, resulting in fever, skin peeling and joint pain. Four of the patients tested positive for COVID-19 and six were found to have antibodies, suggesting they had previously been infected.

Countries across the world are balancing the need to revive stalled economies against the risk of a new wave of deadly infections. In Germany, regional leaders pushed back against Chancellor Angela Merkel's pleas for caution, with the biggest state Bavaria saying it would reopen restaurants and hotels this month. Hong Kong announced plans to reopen schools, cinemas, bars and beauty parlors from Friday, while Californian bookshops, florists and clothing stores will also be allowed to reopen at the end of the week.

Social distancing rules were eased in South Korea, where workers went back to offices yesterday, and museums and libraries were reopened. And in ground-zero Wuhan, Chinese youngsters filed back to class yesterday for the first time since the city was shut down in January, wearing masks and walking past thermal scanners. Senior school students in 121 institutions were back in front of chalk boards and digital displays for the first time since their city - the ground zero of the coronavirus pandemic - shut down in January. Teenagers sat at individual desks spaced a metre apart, seeing their teachers in the flesh after months of distance learning.

Only the province's oldest students were present yesterday - vocational students and seniors who are due to take the make-or-break university entrance exams. Officials in Wuhan say students and staff must all have had virus tests before going back to school, and campuses have been disinfected and cleaned. In preparation for reopening, some schools spaced out their desks and organized smaller class sizes, according to local media. Thermal scanners greeted everyone walking through school gates, and anyone with a high temperature was not allowed in. State-run China Daily said some places arranged staggered arrival times for teachers and students.

The pandemic's economic casualties have continued to pile up. Spain added 280,000 people to its jobless ranks, while the Virgin Atlantic airline said it would have to fire one in three staff as the virus grounds planes worldwide. Walt Disney said it expected an impact of some \$1.4 billion in the current fiscal quarter as a result of a massive hit to its theme parks and other operations. And home-sharing platform Airbnb announced it would slash one fourth of its workforce due to the collapse of the travel industry.

In a ray of hope for the sports world, South Korea's baseball players returned to action, albeit to empty stadiums. Banners with photos of masked fans stretched across the bleachers at the SK Wyverns club's Munsu Baseball Stadium in Incheon. Players have been asked not to shake hands or exchange high-fives, while spitting is prohibited. Tomorrow will also see the delayed start of the country's football K-League.

"Drones have quickly emerged as a vital technology for public safety agencies during this crisis as

they can safely monitor public spaces," according to the website of DJI, by far the world's top drone maker. Like most countries, Morocco primarily uses imported Chinese drones. But the emergence of new applications linked to the pandemic is also driving local production of specialized aerial vehicles. "There is real demand," said Abderrahmane Krioual, the head of Farasha, a startup that has raised funds to produce drones for thermal surveillance and aerial disinfectant spraying.

The aeronautics department of the International University of Rabat (UIR) offered its facilities, expertise and prototypes to authorities in March, deploying drones with loudspeakers or infrared cameras able to detect movement at night or spot individuals with high temperatures. Several projects are underway across the country ahead of the widespread deployment of various models of drones, said Mohsine Bouya, the university's director of technology development and transfer.

Teams are also developing tracking applications, but "we'll have to wait for a change to the law" before launching them, he said. Moroccan authorities declined to comment on the use of drones or the numbers deployed since the start of the public health emergency in mid-March. — AFP

Stars

Daily SuDoku

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

very hard

Yesterday's Solution

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

hard

STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)
Your warm, loving, romantic nature is noticed whether you realize it or not, Aries. Perhaps you sometimes feel like there isn't enough excitement in your life - especially your love life. Don't think this means you need to change to please others. Your stable, quiet nature is comforting to those who understand and appreciate it.

Libra (September 23-October 22)
Do what you can to stabilize your emotions, Libra. Romance should be on a slow, steady path as long as you're honest with yourself and others about how you feel. Perhaps you're so caught up in your fantasy world that you fail to see that things are actually moving in your favor.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)
When it comes to romance in your life, Taurus, there may be a great deal of talk but not enough action. Perhaps you're a terrific flirt who can keep things moving at a quick pace intellectually, but nothing comes of it when you have to take concrete action and manifest those words in a romantic setting.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)
You need to slow down in matters of love and romance, Scorpio. You're likely acting on the assumption that things are fine and you can continue moving at lightning speed even though you long ago lost your road map. There's a degree of fantasy in your world. It doesn't take into account the fact that there are areas where you need to be more sensitive to your partner and perhaps take things more slowly and methodically.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)
Things are coming to a dramatic climax for you in matters of love and romance, Gemini. Perhaps you've been nurturing a relationship. You've put a lot of passion and soul into building a strong connection. This is a time of reckoning in which you take a step back and see what you've gained from it all.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)
Issues of love and romance should be going well for you, Sagittarius, and you'll find that regardless of where you are in your relationships, you're right where you need to be. There's an element of fantasy happening for you today that's making you much more susceptible to romantic dreams and ideas than usual. The good news is that you have the power to put these dreams into motion.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)
For you, Cancer, love is like an adventure, crazy sport, or some sort of video arcade game. Lately, you may have been too caught up in the fantasy aspect of it without taking into account the practical nature and nitty-gritty of what it takes to keep a relationship afloat. You might need to take a more realistic view of it now.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)
Things are coming to a difficult stalemate regarding the love in your life, Capricorn. Perhaps you've felt like everything was going fine and you had nothing to worry about. In reality, this notion of "fine" was just your self-denial hard at work making you think that you could continue on your path without really considering how your actions affected others.

Leo (July 23-August 22)
Love and romance should be going well for you now, Leo. However, today you could find that things get a bit uneasy when either you or your partner suspects something isn't true or is suspicious about the situation at hand. Someone may get caught in a difficult predicament when the veil of deception is suddenly lifted and the truth revealed.

Aquarius (January 20- February 18)
Love is very real to you. You're apt to take it very seriously, perhaps even too seriously, Aquarius. This is one of those emotions that eventually takes over your brain and leaves no room for rational thoughts on the topic. The good news is that matters regarding love and romance should be stabilizing at this time, allowing you to face this area of your life from a rational perspective.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)
The notion of truth could get shot down today due to someone who knows you better than most, Virgo. It won't take a long, drawn-out conversation or deep explanation to reveal the fact that there is a bit of deception that has been covering the truth. Don't try to hide from loved ones who are only trying to do what's best for you.

Pisces (February 19-March 20)
Matters of the heart are likely to get a bit sticky, Pisces. Perhaps you feel as if someone is shutting off from you and being very stubborn about it. Perhaps this person is giving you the cold shoulder and refusing to acknowledge you until you crawl back with an apology. The problem is that your pride is stubborn, and your view on the matter is equally so, making any resolution difficult.

Find the way



Join the dots



Crossword

DIRECTIONS:
Find and circle the vocabulary words in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.

Fast Food Restaurants

- A and W
- Arby's
- Burger King
- Carl's Jr.
- Chipotle
- Chuck E. Cheese's
- Church's Chicken
- Cinnabon
- Dairy Queen
- Domino's
- Dunkin' Donuts
- Five Guys
- Hardee's
- Jack in the Box

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



- Jollibee
- KFC
- Little Caesars
- Long John Silver's
- McDonald's
- Panda Express
- Papa John's Pizza
- Pizza Hut
- Popeyes
- Quiznos
- Starbucks
- Subway
- Taco Bell
- TCBY
- The Pizza Company
- Tim Hortons
- TKK Fried Chicken
- Wendy's
- Wingstop
- WingStreet

Sports

Photo of the day



Luciano Benavides rides in the Empty Quarter during stage 11 of the Dakar Rally. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Golf leaders set three-stage plan to reopen courses

MIAMI: US golf industry leaders unveiled a three-stage plan Tuesday to reopen courses with safety protocols in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

Almost all states permit or are set to allow golf courses to reopen with social distancing and other measures aimed at avoiding the spread of the deadly virus over more than 16,000 layouts.

The "Back2Golf" program, supported by the PGA and LPGA Tours plus the US Golf Association and PGA of America, also has the backing of US course owners and superintendents and club managers.

"While we recognize there's no perfect solution and various areas of the country will progress in these phases at a different pace, it's imperative that we reopen golf in a way that prioritizes the health and well being of the entire golf community," PGA of America chief executive Seth Waugh said. The stages follow guidelines for the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including social distancing and greater sanitization protocols, and allow for differing stages in different areas as city and state regulations allow activity.

Stage one allows for no more than 10 people in a single area, with players distancing from each other while walking or going solo in golf carts with those in vulnerable groups not participating.

Stage two would allow for up to 50 people in an area but players still distancing from one another and still no golfing for those in vulnerable groups such as being over 60 or with existing health conditions. A restricted course set-up remains in place, going without rakes or removing flagsticks, with limited clubhouse activities and restrictions on leagues and events. Stage three, dubbed "the new normal," would allow golf for vulnerable people provided they use social distance guidelines and other precautionary measures. Others should minimize time in crowded situations but all golf operations can resume with unrestricted staffing.

Comprehensive sanitary procedures would remain in place with normal course maintenance and operations. —AFP

Surf's up for poor kids seeking a better future in El Salvador

Goal is to prepare them for a future as watersports professionals

EL ZONTE: Striking down the front of a curving wave, the little girl balances fleetingly before tumbling — she is one of dozens of poor kids in El Salvador getting a tantalizing chance to surf their way out of poverty.

El Zonte on the Central American country's coast is a world surfing mecca, where powerful Pacific swells explode onto pristine beaches an hour's drive from the capital San Salvador.

The little 11-year-old is one of around 20 local children from poor families being offered a chance to surf their way to future employment.

Schooled by volunteer instructors, the goal is to prepare them for a future as watersports professionals, part of a multi-million dollar government project to develop the watersports industry.

"We are opening an opportunity to learn how to surf and other activities so that these girls and boys can be empowered leaders of their communities and can escape poverty," said Yasmin Solorzano, 34, a coordinator of the volunteer program called Medusas.

The children also learn English from their instructors and are encouraged to study up to university level, added Solorzano, speaking before the novel coronavirus pandemic halted the program.

"It's a path for them. We want them to use what they learn here so that they can have a professional career and at the same time surf," said Mariam Lopez, 37, another instructor.

The program started two years ago, initially for girls to take surfing lessons two Sundays a month, but

now it also welcomes boys who live near beaches in the local department of La Libertad.

SURF VOLUNTEERS

El Zonte's laid-back ambience is a world away from El Salvador's notorious gang violence, and central to a plan by President Nayib Bukele to present a tourist-friendly face to the world.

Surfing draws tourists here from United States, the Netherlands, Canada, Brazil and Germany, and many have chosen to stay. Learning to surf in El Zonte is not cheap, and classes alone can cost between 10 and 50 dollars an hour. But instructors at the entirely volunteer-supported Medusas program —

many of them foreigners — do not charge and boards are rented out at a minimal cost.

"I really like children and I also really like helping people, and I don't just come here to enjoy the waves, but also to give something to people," 33-year-old Nette Klement from the

Netherlands told AFP.

The children also take lessons on the environment, English and art provided by Medusas one Sunday a month in the courtyard of a small hotel. El Zonte is part of a \$200 million Surf City development project promoted by Bukele to turn this part of El Salvador into an international destination.

"Surf City is an ambitious project with which we want to position El Salvador as one of the best destinations for surf and beach tourism in Latin America," said Tourism Minister Morena Valdez.

El Salvador earned \$1.76 billion in tourism revenue

It's a path for them



EL ZONTE BEACH: File photo taken on March 01, 2020 shows a girl stands on a surfing board next to a volunteer trainer during a surf lesson at El Zonte beach, La Libertad department, 55km southwest of San Salvador. —AFP

in 2019, up from \$1.5 billion in 2018, according to ministry figures. China has promised to finance a \$35 million sewage treatment plant and a potable water plant in the area.

The coronavirus pandemic cruelly prevented El Salvador from putting itself on the world surfing

events calendar when the ISA World Surfing Games 2020 event, due to be hosted by nearby El Suncal beach, was cancelled.

Up for grabs at the games were qualifying spots for the Tokyo Olympics, where surfing is to make its debut as an Olympic sport. —AFP

Rugby Australia director Peter Wiggs resigns

MELBOURNE: Rugby Australia (RA) director Peter Wiggs has resigned after less than six weeks in the role amid reports of disharmony on the board as the embattled governing body seeks a new chief executive to replace Raelene Castle.

Private equity manager Wiggs had been endorsed by influential backers in Australian sport to replace RA Chairman Paul McLean, who is due to step down in July. However, local media reported on Tuesday that his attempt to push through the appointment of Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) Chief Executive Matt Carroll to replace Castle without a recruitment process did not sit well with other directors.

"Peter has decided to step down from the board and I understand his reasons," McLean said in a RA statement yesterday. "He has undertaken some very important work and has made a valuable contribution to the organisation, in a very short time, and we are thankful for his contribution."

"The immediate priority of the board is to install a replacement for Peter, and an interim Chief Executive. I will provide an update on

those matters at the appropriate time." Carroll signalled that he was not interested in the RA role on Tuesday, saying in a statement that he was focused on his work at the AOC.

RA is battling a financial crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with uncertainty over future revenues due to the suspension of all rugby in Australia and other nations. New Zealander Castle quit last month after nearly three years at the helm, saying she believed the RA board no longer wanted her in the role.

Meanwhile, Top 14 presidents will meet to decide which French clubs will play in next season's European Champions Cup after the domestic campaign was stopped due to the coronavirus.

League holders Toulouse, three-time continental winners Toulon and table toppers Bordeaux-Begles could be absent depending on which of the four options the bosses choose, with the term stopped with nine regular season rounds to go.

The current campaign was declared over last week due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the country as Prime Minister Edouard Philippe banned rugby and football until September. The stand-out favourite scenario is to hold play-offs in September between the teams sitting between fifth and eighth place, sources have told AFP.

Victor Vito's La Rochelle would play Handre Pollard's Montpellier as well as possible a re-run of last year's Top 14 final with Clermont, who could have new signing in

Japan's Kotaro Matsushima available to face Jerome Kaino's Toulouse.

Other avenues to be considered include taking last season's standings which would leave Toulon and Bordeaux-Begles in the second-tier Challenge Cup. "If it happens, we'll adapt and play the match in the best conditions," Montpellier coach Xavier Garbajosa told radio station France Bleu.

"Today, our position after 17 rounds doesn't allow us to have any grievances," he added. French sports daily L'Equipe reported last week that next season's Champions Cup will change from its format of five pools of four to one with 18 outfits in one group starting in December.

According to the daily, sides will play two different teams home and away with the top eight reaching the quarter-finals as to save a weekend and play the knock-outs from the currently postponed season in the autumn.

"The idea is to not have matches without anything at stake at the end of the pool stages," Lyon president Yann Roubert told the paper.

The chiefs' decision about which half a dozen French outfits play in the Champions Cup will have to be validated by the executive board of the league which is likely to meet next week. The board, which includes French rugby federation president Bernard Laporte as well as bosses from the clubs, are expected to announce no winner of the Top 14 for the first time since the Second World War. —Agencies

Giro, Vuelta clash in 'great' new cycling calendar

PARIS: A revised calendar from the International Cycling Union (UCI) on Tuesday revealed the Giro d'Italia and Vuelta a Espana will overlap by six days, while there was also a brand new women's version of the sport's toughest one day race.

The 'Hell of the North' Paris-Roubaix has been fixed for October 25, with a first ever women's version of the gruelling, mud-splattered slog over cobbled mining roads.

The race is epic in its length with swathes of riders not making it to the finish line and is a key date for sports fans in France. Two other top one-day races Liege-Bastogne-Liege and the Tour of Flanders already had women's dates and were rescheduled for men and women October 4 and October 18.

"We have the desire to increase the number of events in women's racing and give them media coverage," the chief of the race organiser Christian Prudhomme told AFP. "We continue to bear in mind what riders like Marianne Vos ask of us in terms of media exposure."

Cycling's most prestigious race the Tour de France was pushed back two months to August 29, with the world road championships at Aigle in Switzerland to start on September 20. The UCI also announced new dates for the two other Grand Tours, with the Giro to start in Budapest on October 3 and finish in Rome on October 25 and the Vuelta to be run between October 20 and November 8.

MIXED FEELINGS

Despite the overlap Spanish cycling authorities said they were delighted with a 'great opportunity', after they feared being pushed back even further in the year. "We have to try to turn this necessity into a virtue," said Vuelta director Javier Guillen.

"We have a great position in the calendar and we hope to have an exceptional participation level." The Giro organiser RCS appeared frustrated by the overlap. "We made a number of alternative proposals, which in our opinion, would have resulted in reduced overlaps," an RCS statement said.

But they expressed gratitude for the huge logistical reorganisation that was able to run the Giro. "It is the result of an unparalleled extensive work involving the institutions, organisations, teams and others who have contributed to this difficult choice." —AFP

Sports

For Rennes coach, Champions League dream is not quite how he imagined it

Rennes had never before finished in the top three

RENNES: Long one of the great underachievers in French football, Rennes are now looking forward to the Champions League thanks to the sterling work of young coach Julien Stephan, but the coronavirus crisis could make it harder to compete at Europe's top table.

The club from Brittany are owned by luxury goods mogul Francois Pinault, one of France's richest men, yet they had never qualified for the Champions League before. Stephan has changed that, leading Rennes to third in Ligue 1 before the season was suspended in mid-March with 10 games remaining because of the pandemic.

Last week's decision by the French league to declare the season over was therefore good news for Rennes, given only the top three in Ligue 1 qualify for the Champions League.

"In the context it seems like the wisest decision. And in our case we still played three-quarters of the season and I think we deserved to be third," Stephan said in an interview with AFP. Rennes had never before finished in the top three and Stephan, 39, admits his team "overperformed".

It is still unclear how and when this season will finish in the rest of Europe, never mind when next season will start. When it does, Rennes will need to come through two qualifying rounds to join fellow French sides Paris Saint-Germain and Marseille in the Champions League group stage.

"We are not there yet, but if we are fortunate enough to make it we know full well that it is another dimension. The level is extremely high and you need experience and maturity to handle it. It is another world," Stephan said.

ECONOMIC CRISIS

Nevertheless, Rennes have shown under Stephan that they can compete with some of Europe's biggest sides. He was appointed in late 2018 and last season took the team to the Europa League last 16, beating Arsenal 3-1 at Roazhon Park before losing the return in London.

Rennes then stunned PSG on penalties in the French Cup final to win their first silverware in almost 50 years, and now they have Champions League football on the horizon.

However, before they get that far, they may need to ward off the predators circling around their brilliant 17-year-old midfielder Eduardo Camavinga. He has been heavily linked with Real Madrid.

The situation is further complicated by the economic crisis affecting football because of the virus-induced suspension — the French league is asking for a 225 million-euro (\$246m) government-guaranteed loan to help clubs compensate for lost television income.

"We will need to see what the consequences are



Wisest decision



Coach Julien Stephan (left) instructing his player during the match.

for the club," admitted Stephan, whose father Guy is assistant to France coach Didier Deschamps. "At the moment we are having to build with a Europa League budget rather than a Champions League budget.

"The difficult thing will be strengthening the squad while also living within our means. The objective really is to try to keep the core of the team together."

In the meantime, Stephan is waiting to see when games can resume, and when fans will be allowed back into stadiums. "We are going through a difficult period which will have considerable economic and social consequences," he said. "Our job normally is to provide a spectacle, give people pleasure and put a smile on their faces. I think that is going to become even more important." — AFP

England's Morgan goes to bat for T10 format at Olympics

LONDON: England's World Cup-winning captain Eoin Morgan says cricket's 10-overs format would be ideal for a global multi-sport event such as the Olympics as the entire tournament could be squeezed into 10 days.

Cricket featured at the 1900 Olympics and was played in the 1998 Commonwealth Games but has largely been absent from multi-sport events, which some say has restricted its growth beyond the traditional pockets.

The 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham will feature a women's Twenty20 competition but Morgan says the T10 format would be a better fit than T20, 50 overs or test cricket.

"The one thing that T10 offers above the three formats that makes it so appealing to an Olympic Games or

a Commonwealth Games is the fact that you can play a whole tournament in the space of 10 days," he said in a video conference.

"To have a tournament in such a short space of time maximises the opportunity and the exposure that it will have for the sport.

"When you can play a cricket tournament in eight-10 days it really does make it appealing, and on top of that it really would be extremely entertaining," said the 33-year-old, who captains Delhi Bulls in the Abu Dhabi T10 league.

Twenty20 has emerged as cricket's most popular format, having spawned several franchise-based leagues around the world including the lucrative Indian Premier League (IPL).

But Morgan, who plays for the



Eoin Morgan

IPL's Kolkata franchise, said T10 has its own merits.

"The most important part of a T20 game is always overs 10 to 20," said Morgan, who also captains Delhi Bulls in the Abu Dhabi T10 competition.

"But if you look at a T10 game, the earlier overs are the most important. You need to make the most of that very short powerplay, so who you put in those key positions and in the form that they're in, is the most critical factor." — Reuters

FFA to complete A-League season by end of August

SYDNEY: Football Federation Australia wants to resume the 2019-2020 A-League season towards the end of July and complete it before the end of August, Adelaide United's director of football Bruce Djite said yesterday.

The A-League was brought to a halt in March because of the coronavirus outbreak with five rounds of the regular season and the championship playoffs left to play. "My understanding is they want the season completed by the end of August," Djite told reporters in Adelaide yesterday. "So mathematically, three games a week and all the rest you could knock it out in four or five weeks. Then you work back from that and say you need at least four, five weeks training, so you're looking at late June, early July.

"But there's a lot of water to go under the bridge before that... There's still a lot of unknowns." With the players laid off and mostly surviving on the government's JobKeeper coronavirus wage subsidy programme, Djite said the FFA would need to sit down

with their union to "nut out" details on pay before any training resumed.

"The boys aren't coming back to train on JobKeeper," he said. "Those discussions have to be had as a matter of urgency, so there's clarity from players' mindset and there's clarity for clubs in financial management of what the cost is going to be.

"Because at the moment there's no revenues and we don't know what the cost base looks like to finish off the season." Social distancing measures have managed to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Australia to only a trickle of new cases each day and restrictions look set to be eased nationwide over the next week or two. Some will remain, however, and one proposal being considered to complete the A-League season is gathering the teams into a central hub in Sydney and playing all the remaining matches behind closed doors there.

"As a club we are happy to do that, and the players are happy to do that, we just want to finish the season," said Djite. "People are more comfortable now with jumping on a plane to New South Wales." Adelaide United will need a new manager before any action resumes after Gertjan Verbeek headed back home to the Netherlands in April before resigning last week.

The club's last four managers have been Europeans but Djite said they would be looking closer to home for Verbeek's replacement. "We want an Australian coach for next season," he said. — Reuters

"I think everyone is really excited about that. Hopefully it's the first step to a bigger opening as well." Seattle Sounders midfielder Cristian Roldan said he looks forward to returning to the complex for training, noting players will need time to restore match fitness before MLS games can resume.

"I'm hearing that we'll probably have about three weeks to a month to prepare for the season," Roldan said in an MLS website post. "I think that's fair. We understand it takes a lot to get your body back into a 90-minute rhythm." MLS guidelines for the workouts include temperature checks for players on arrival, hand washing and disinfectant stations and designated parking spots to maximize distancing.

"I do think it'll be some on-the-ball stuff, allowing the players to get some touches in," Real Salt Lake general manager Elliot Fall said.

"But at the end of the day, the players, they can't be playing balls to each other, so it's going to have to be stuff they can do on their own." Even solo practice sessions will help players by returning to familiar settings. "I think there's a real benefit to getting players back to the facility in any capacity, because I think, like all of us, we're all looking for some level of normalcy and life to get back to some semblance of what our reality used to be," Fall said. — AFP

MLS players to return to team training facilities

NEW YORK: Major League Soccer players will return to team training facilities for individual outdoor workouts starting today in areas where governments have eased coronavirus pandemic precautions to allow such practices.

The voluntary sessions are a small first step toward a resumption of play for the 26-team North American league, which shut down March 12 after two weeks of regular-season matches. MLS has banned full team training through May 15, with no more than four players at a time on a field during the solo workouts and no passing between players allowed.

"Even if it's individual and we're not training with each other, I think we're all itching just to get back on the field and be training in some capacity with the ball," Houston Dynamo goalkeeper Michael Nelson said in a posting on the team website.

UK sports leaders outline 'catastrophic' coronavirus impact

LONDON: Rugby Football Union (RFU) chief executive Bill Sweeney warned of the "catastrophic" impact coronavirus could have on the sport if the professional game cannot return in the next year.

Sweeney revealed England's RFU, which has already lost £15 million (\$19 million) due to the crisis, will lose a total of £107 million if the autumn internationals are cancelled. The prospect of also having to postpone or play next year's Six Nations Championship behind closed doors is even more stark.

"Eighty-five percent of our revenues come from hosting men's internationals at Twickenham," Sweeney told a meeting of the UK's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) committee on Tuesday.

"If this was to be prolonged and go into the summer of next year and the Six Nations games were impacted then it would be a catastrophic impact on rugby union in England. "If we get into a situation where we are talking about Six Nations matches next February/March being impacted then there is a limit to what we can do independently. We would have to be coming to government for some kind of support."

English Football League (EFL) chairman Rick Parry and England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) chief executive Tom Harrison also spelled out the gravity of the financial crisis facing their sports to politicians.

The ECB's controversial new Hundred competition has been delayed until 2021 and even if Test matches can go ahead later in the summer, they are likely to be behind closed doors. "We anticipate with no cricket this year a worst-case scenario could be as bad as £380 million," said Harrison on the loss of revenue faced by the ECB. "That would be the loss of 800 days of cricket across all of our professional clubs and the ECB. That is the worst-case scenario for us this year."

'FINANCIAL HOLE'

England were due to host the West Indies and Pakistan in Test matches this summer. However, the West Indies series has already been delayed with professional cricket postponed until at least July.

"Hopefully we will be able to play a significant number of Test matches this summer which will help us mitigate those financial losses that we are facing at the moment," added Harrison. The prospects for football clubs below the Premier League are also dire with lower leagues much more dependent on gate receipts than the top tier. Premier League clubs are hoping to forge ahead with their "Project Restart" with the aim of salvaging £762 million in television deals for the remainder of this season alone.

By contrast, Parry believes it would cost clubs in his organisation to put games on behind closed doors. "We are heading for a financial hole of about £200 million by the end of September," said Parry. "We have a great deal of uncertainty around next season of course, the great undetermined matter being when we're going to return to play in front of crowds, which for the EFL is absolutely critical." — AFP

Gobert, Mitchell ready to bury hatchet: Lindsey

LOS ANGELES: Utah Jazz chief Dennis Lindsey said Tuesday that Rudy Gobert and Donovan Mitchell are ready to bury the hatchet following the feud triggered by their positive tests for COVID-19.

Gobert and Mitchell, two pillars of the Utah franchise, did not speak to each other for around one month after Gobert tested positive for the coronavirus on March 11, triggering the suspension of the NBA season.

French star Gobert had attracted widespread criticism for his conduct in the days before his positive test, which included theatrically touching multiple recording devices and microphones during a press briefing.

Gobert later apologized for what he described as his "embarrassing, inexcusable" behavior, saying he had not taken the threat of the virus seriously.

Mitchell, who tested positive after Gobert, later spoke of a need for individuals to "educate themselves" and "behave responsibly."

The comments hinted at a deep rift between the two team-mates.

Mitchell subsequently admitted it had taken him a while to "cool off" following the incident.

However Gobert and Mitchell were ready to settle their differences, Utah executive vice president of basketball Lindsey said Tuesday.

"They're ready to put this behind them, move forward, act professionally," Lindsey told media on a video conference call.

"We look forward to moving forward. They've said their piece to each other. They've both visited at the ownership level, at management level, at the coaches level, at the players level with each other.

"[Mitchell and Gobert] will speak for themselves going forward. But, at the most basic level, they know they need each other to complete their goal of being the last team standing in the NBA."

Lindsey meanwhile said Utah had taken positives out of the fact that Gobert's infection had been discovered relatively early.

"It's woken me up a few times thinking what might have happened if we were to have that test come back a little bit later and the players were already playing the game," Lindsey said.

"As tough as it was for us to have Rudy be the first, I think it saved infections. Not to be melodramatic, but I think it saved lives." — AFP

18 Surf's up for poor kids seeking a better future in El Salvador



19 For Rennes coach, Champions League dream is not quite how he imagined it



19 England's Morgan goes to bat for T10 format at Olympics



Juventus players back training

Cristiano Ronaldo begins two weeks' coronavirus quarantine



TURIN: A person (L) undergoes a body temperature scan at the entrance of Juventus' so-called "J medical" medical center at the Juventus stadium in Turin on May 5, 2020, during the country's lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 infection, caused by the novel coronavirus. Juventus has recalled its 10 overseas players as Serie A clubs were given the green light to return to individual training. Players returning from abroad are to follow a health protocol and then begin training at Continassa. — AFP

MILAN: Giorgio Chiellini led the way as Juventus players returned to individual training at the team's sports centre on Tuesday, while Cristiano Ronaldo began two weeks' coronavirus quarantine after returning to Italy.

Captain Chiellini, 35, arrived early with Italy defender Leonardo Bonucci, wearing a black face mask, just after midfielder Aaron Ramsey. Playmaker Miralem Pjanic showed up in the afternoon, along with Juan Cuadrado, Mattia De Sciglio, Federico Bernardeschi and Daniele Rugani.

Serie A champions Juve said the training sessions, which are allowed thanks to Sunday's green light from the Italian interior ministry, "will take place on an individual basis and with staggered arrivals to allow full compliance with the regulations in force".

"After a day of tests and exams carried out yesterday at J Medical, some of the Juventus players started training at the Continassa Training Centre, where they officially began their recovery to regain competitive form," Juve added.

Ronaldo's return is more uncertain after two months of confinement on his native island of Madeira, having played in Juventus' last match against Inter Milan on March 8 behind closed doors.

The five-time Ballon d'Or winner returned with his family to Turin by private jet late on Monday, and is in quarantine awaiting tests. The interior ministry's go-ahead has allowed players to return to club training facilities two weeks ahead of schedule, offering a glimmer of hope that the 2019-20 season might yet be saved.

As well as Juventus, top-flight clubs Atalanta,

Bologna and Udinese also got back to training on Tuesday, with Sassuolo and Lecce leading the way on Monday. But sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora warned training in groups must wait until May 18, and it remains uncertain whether matches can restart as the country battles the COVID-19 pandemic which has killed more than 29,000 in Italy.

"A realistic prediction can be made in mid-May," Spadafora said in an interview with newspaper Corriere della Sera on Tuesday, denying he wanted to call a halt to the season. "It would be surreal for a sports minister to demonise football," he said after a newspaper created a front-page photo of him with a dagger about to burst a ball, with the headline "Attack on Football".

"I hope to start again, but the government will decide ... There is no opposition from me, just the

desire to evaluate a restart only if the health of the people within the team group will be safeguarded.

"If the government is forced, and I hope not, to admit that the conditions (needed to resume) are not there, my commitment will be twofold — limit the financial damage to clubs and support the whole world of sport.

"Between ordinary and extraordinary resources, we will invest about one billion euros (\$1.08 billion) for the sector as a whole." A meeting has been scheduled for Thursday between the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) and members of the government's Technical Scientific Committee to discuss the medical protocol for the resumption of group training.

European federations have a deadline of May 25 to inform UEFA if their league will resume, and if so on what date and with what format. —AFP

Tennis establishes virus player fund, raises \$6 million

PARIS: A fund for tennis players hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic has been created, the sport's governing bodies announced on Tuesday, adding that they had contributed more than \$6 million (5.3 million euros).

In a joint statement, the ATP and WTA tours, the International Tennis Federation and the four Grand Slam tournaments — the Australian Open, Roland-Garros, Wimbledon and the US Open — said the Player Relief Programme will support those "who are facing unprecedented challenges due to the global impact of COVID-19".

With the tennis season suspended until at least July 13, some "800 ATP/WTA singles and doubles players" are in need of financial support, the statement continued, with eligibility for the fund deter-

mined by a player's ranking and previous prize money earnings.

The fund can also be donated to via initiatives including auctions, player donations and virtual tennis games, added the governing bodies, who last month announced talks about creating the programme.

The virus has caused havoc to the calendar, with Wimbledon cancelled for the first time since World War II and the French Open postponed until the end of September. The United States Tennis Association will decide in mid-June whether or not the US Open will take place in New York.

However despite the financial difficulties facing hundreds of players, the idea of a relief fund was dismissed by world number three Dominic Thiem, who said last month he would not give lower-ranked players his money.

"Quite honestly I have to say that no tennis player will be fighting to survive, even those who are much lower-ranked," Thiem said, speaking of a separate fund idea revealed by Novak Djokovic. "None of them are going to starve ... I would rather give money to people or organisations that really need it."

Meanwhile, Women's Tennis Association (WTA) chief Steve Simon has said a merger with the men's

ATP "makes all the sense in the world" but that it would not take the form of "an acquisition".

The tennis season was suspended in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the hiatus will continue at least until mid-July, depriving lower-level players who depend solely on tournament winnings of the chance to earn a living.

Roger Federer called for a merger between the two governing bodies last month, with both Simon and ATP Tour Chairman Andrea Gaudenzi welcoming the suggestion.

But some top WTA players have said they want an equal standing for the women players in a combined body. "It's not an acquisition," WTA Chief Executive Simon told the New York Times. "This isn't about either tour taking territory."

"Right now we compete against ourselves as well as all the other leagues and entertainment properties. We compete for fans, partners, sponsorships as well as broadcast and data, so the alignment allows you to aggregate assets."

As many as seven associations run different parts of the sport in the world. Besides the ATP and the WTA Tours, tennis is also controlled by the International Tennis Federation and the boards of the four

Grand Slam tournaments.

Currently viewers need different pay-TV platforms to watch tennis matches and a merger of the Tours could simplify television contracts and sponsorship deals. The men's and women's players have a separate ranking system while some rules, including on-court coaching, are also different.

"I'm not afraid of the full merger; I never have been," Simon said. "I would certainly be the first to support it, because I think then you truly have the business and the strategic principles all aligned, which is what you need to do."

"Obviously it's a long and winding road to get there, but I think it makes all the sense in the world. "This isn't about trying to save the WTA. We'll be fine, but look, if we're going to do the right business thing and we're finally going to bring the sport together, I think the WTA would be very supportive of this concept."

Simon said it was a "unique time" for tennis. "Crisis and challenges can sometimes provide opportunity as well," he added. "There's going to be no shortage of accountants, tax attorneys, attorneys and everybody else that is involved with it. It would take time, but conceptually it may not take as long.—Agencies