


Friday Times

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Ramadan KAREEM

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KUWAIT: In this April 7, 2020 file photo, cleaning workers are seen through barbed wire in the locked down Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Kuwait mulls total lockdown after COVID-19 cases soar

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Local

Cabin Fever

Pandemic Diaries

By Jamie Etheridge

etheridge@kuwaittimes.com



Over the last few days we've seen the numbers of curfew breakers grow, as many as 23 people arrested in one night for being outside their homes during the curfew hours.

As the Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah has warned, staying home is an absolute necessity and especially in this critical period when the infection rate is spiking.

At the same time, we are now completing our ninth week of 'stay at home'. Nine weeks of going out only for necessities or work, nine weeks of no school for the children, no outside excursions, no trips to the shops or the parks or restaurants. Nine weeks of lockdown.

There are signs around the globe that the pandemic lockdown is impacting not only our health and economies but also our mental health and this is especially true for children and youth. Being stuck at home



Nine weeks of going out only for necessities or work

for more than two months with limited or no outside activities is stressful, even if you are lucky enough to have a comfortable home with a garden and plenty of space.

Being stuck at home with no end in sight, with no timeline for when this might end and life might return back to normal adds to the anxiety.

Humans need change. They need movement, outdoor time, socializing with friends, challenges and experiences. Keeping indoors for weeks on end limits stimuli, especially fresh stimuli and can erode our patience and calm, can fuel anxiety and depression.

We all start to feel the effects of cabin fever, the need to go out somewhere just to feel relaxed. Usually home is the place where we feel the most at rest, the most relaxed but when one cannot leave home, the opposite effect begins to grow. We feel claustrophobic, restless.

That is why, though now is the most important time to stay at home, it is likely we will see even more curfew breakers. Despite the fines and penalties, some people won't be able to resist. There are those breaking the curfew who simply don't respect the rules or who are out committing crimes. But no doubt there are a few who just felt overwhelmed, overcome by a sudden need to go outside.

Being Positive

IN MY VIEW

By Abdellatif Sharaa

local@kuwaittimes.com



I was about 10 years old when my late father, may Allah bless his soul, decided to go for Hajj, (pilgrimage to Makkah). Then when it was time to travel, he decided to take the bus because many of his friends and extended family members were taking the bus also. Pilgrims got ready and went to the station in Amman, Jordan in waiting for the bus, which came from the city of Nablus on the West Bank of the River Jordan. The waiting passengers became restless as the bus was late, before it finally arrived. The pilgrims, while waiting, became very angry, and what made me proud was my father's tactics to calm them down, telling them that they are now on a special journey that is like no other, must shed their normal daily life routine and concentrate on prayers. When the bus arrived and pilgrims started boarding, some of them tried to vent their anger on the driver, and the amazing thing is how calm the bus driver was, as he tried to tell them the weather conditions did not help and he had to "negotiate with the hills and val-

leys." Once all were aboard, I was able to hear my father reading prayers particular to the occasion, and everyone were repeating after him.

I believe that wise and rational individuals can bring peace of mind and diffuse what could potentially be a dangerous situation out of irrational act or words. Those who are described as expert in the world of positivity say that most of us probably think "happy." However, happiness is not the only type of positivity. There are many ways to be more positive in your life even when you are experiencing sadness, anger or challenges. Research suggests that we have powerful capabilities to choose positive emotions and ways of thinking. In fact, our emotions literally change our bodies on a cellular level. Many of our experiences in life are a result of how we interpret and respond to our surroundings. Fortunately, rather than repressing or trying to get rid of negative feelings, we can choose to interpret and respond to them differently. You will find that with some practice, patience and perseverance, you become more positive. Let us be calm, cool and collected every time we face something to our disliking. Keep a cool nerve so that you can think correctly, and decisions can be made the way they should be.

Final word: "Being positive isn't pretending that everything is good - It's seeing the good in everything." - (unknown)

Eid in isolation

IN MY VIEW

By Nawara Fattahova

nawara@kuwaittimes.net



Ramadan this year is completely different from any other Ramadan ever. The most important habit of gathering was banned in this year's holy month. Taraweeh and qiyam prayers in mosques are not possible this year, and even group iftar and suhour in mosques around Kuwait are not happening due to the closure of mosques.

All other social activities usually practiced in Ramadan are not happening this year. Ghabqa, the most popular event which took place in houses, hotels, and diwanis, was when people would gather to meet those they probably didn't see for the whole year. Even the Ramadan visits of diwanis are not taking place this year. Furthermore, children will not celebrate the popular Girgian, in which they used to collect sweets by knocking on doors and singing.

As this Ramadan is passing sadly and has a theme of isolation, Eid Al-Fitr will be welcomed in a similar depressive manner. The public holiday is officially till the end of the month, which is after Eid. And it doesn't seem that the situation will change soon, or that malls or stores will open soon, so Eid shopping for new outfits will also not take place this year.

At the end, what's the sense of buying new outfits if there is no place to go - no restaurants, no malls, no travel-

ling, no family visits, no entertainment, or any other place to go to. All the days are the same - the joy of the holiday has lost its value, as all days are holidays.

Maybe some people will decide to visit their families on Eid, as it's been a very long period of isolation, and we all feel bored and annoyed with home imprisonment. So we should search for online stores to buy outfits for Eid. Some cheap and expensive brand stores have improved their services to be up to date with the present situation, and they continue to sell online to somehow compensate their losses from the long closure of shopping malls. Some even offer free delivery.

Social media accounts, especially on Instagram, are selling collections, but some are facing difficulties in receiving new stocks, as trade with China, from where most of their goods are imported, has been stopped for over three months.

People have different choices for their online shopping, but the disadvantage of this shopping is that they don't see the item physically, so they may find it different after delivery than what was shown on the screen. Also the size may not fit exactly as they want. Big stores and well-known websites have the option to exchange, and some even offer refunds, but some smaller Instagram accounts do not have this option.



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Local



Local engineer makes ear savers for medical staff, frontliners

By Faten Omar

People across Kuwait are contributing their time, effort and creativity to helping frontliners do their job. One young Kuwaiti woman decided to apply her love of crochet to creating ear savers as a thank you for medical staff forced to wear masks for hours at a time.

Reem Bastaki, 30, an engineer who graduated from Ohio State University and works with Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC), came up with the idea of creating ear savers for medical workers in Kuwait after seeing similar devices in the news abroad.

Speaking to Kuwait Times, Bastaki said that since the beginning of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spread in Kuwait in late February 2020, and while watching the situation escalate, her heart went out to the medical workers and frontliners helping out.

"When I saw the ear savers trending around the world to help medical workers, I couldn't help but spread the word and started the project immediately with no hesitation. I have a background in crochet and knitting, and I'm happy to offer the ear saver to all in need," she explained.

"Ear savers are meant to protect the ears from the elastic band of the mask that tucks behind the ears. This band can cause irritation, especially after wearing for long hours. It basically stretches out the band so it is no longer in contact with the ear."

Hijab wearers

Bastaki added that as a hijab wearer, she noticed that her friends and family were uncomfortable with working for long hours with face mask "With ear savers, you can wear the mask on top of the hijab instead of under it which makes it much more convenient for most people."

The ear saver is made from 100 percent cotton yarn using



Local

crochet techniques and is easy to wash. Each order includes a message asking the user to wash the ear saver regularly and to remember that it is for personal use only.

Bastaki has received many orders from Kuwait hospitals, health centers, co-ops' workers, airport workers, departments within the Ministry of Interior, banks, people in home lockdown and others. "I started the project on April 27, 2020 and to date, we distributed 560 ear savers where the total is 1,450 in progress, so far," she said. "The ear savers are distributed for free for whoever needs them within Kuwait, and I'm not accepting any money even when it's offered. Instead, I'm asking everyone who places an order to trade me with unwanted buttons of theirs if possible to continue producing more." Bastaki was happy with the positive feedback she received where people started collecting buttons for her to continue the work.



Safety measures

Regarding the safety measures, she said "Safety measures are my top priority during the work due to the current situation of COVID-19, by following Ministry of Health instructions. All my pieces are sanitized upon packaging where I have my gloves and face mask on. I'm only accepting pick up orders and no delivery, taking into consideration social distancing policies and to limit contact with others."

She concluded "I'd like to thank all crochet makers in Kuwait so much who supported this project and are helping me to

cover the number of orders. This is the least I can do for my country who offered so much to me all these years, and I hope my small act makes a difference and makes someone smile today until we no longer need to walk around with face masks. Then maybe we can turn our ear saver into cup holders. Think about recycling!"

Several doctors were pleased with the straps that help keep the elastic bands of masks from rubbing their ears. Dr Muneera, a periodontist at Amiri Dental Center said that the ear saver is very convenient for those wearing hijab, especially as she now wears a face mask all day without feeling any pain.

Dr Wafaa, volunteer at Kuwait International Airport affirmed that the piece was a helpful gift, saying "It is really handy and useful for long working hours. It also makes you look neat. I'd recommend everyone, especially women that wear hijab to try it out, you won't regret it!"

Arun Ravi, who works at the cytology lab in Al-Sabah Hospital as a Lab Technician and Dr Taiba Al-Hasan works at Faiha clinic agreed with the others, saying that their ear pain was reduced when wearing masks with ear savers.



Local

Lockdown, isolation creates frustration for several Jleeb, Mahboula residents

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: After spending more than a month in isolation, people in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula want to see the end of the lockdown soon, and hope everything will go back to normal. "This is already a very frustrating situation. I can see people crying for no reason at all. When handing over the food they need, I can sense their deep anxiety," said May Siapno, a volunteer distributing food to Filipinos in Jleeb and Hasawi. The area is under lockdown and no one is able to leave without permission.

The Philippine Embassy is doing all it can to help Filipinos, especially those without work and no pay. "This program has been spearheaded by the Philippine Embassy for several weeks now. And until such a time that we are under lockdown, they promised us to bring food to ease the hunger of several Filipinos here. Thanks to the officials at the embassy, because we do not need to stand in long queues to get food," Siapno said.

Kuwait Times asked some Filipinos how they felt about being isolated in Jleeb. "I thought it will last only for two weeks, but we are in lockdown for several weeks now. This is too much, and people are frustrated. We want to live normally. If this situation

lasts longer, I better go home to the Philippines - in our place until now there are zero coronavirus cases," they told Kuwait Times. "I have got food packs since the beginning of the lockdown. I really need some help from the government because our company does not want to pay us until we are back to work," said Doms, a company truck driver.

Jojo Matildo, a Philippine Embassy volunteer who delivers food packs to Mahboula, Fahaheel, Fintas and Mangaf as well Riggae and Jahra, said: "We have several volunteers who are helping us. People's attitudes have changed - during the first few weeks, you could see faces with a smile when you gave them the food packs. Nowadays, no more smiles. Maybe they are frustrated and sad to be recipients of relief packs," Matildo said. "We all want to see the end of this effort done by the embassy; it's been a very hard time for everyone. We hope the lockdown will end soon."

"I have a child and husband. I don't have work, and he also has no work. We are fed up. I always posted photos of the events every day, but I have given up. The posts are not helping us anymore. I keep quiet and have stopped talking with everyone. All I want is for all of us to go back to a normal life," said Shor Sanday, a Mahboula resident.



KUWAIT: People lined up to receive food aid in Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh.



KUWAIT: The Awazem Charity Foundation distributed food aid to families in need at the Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Hall in Salwa recently. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

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Local

Kuwait PM commends huge efforts contributing to repatriation plan success

Tens of thousands repatriated on 185 flights from 58 destinations



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah welcomes citizens arriving as part of the repatriation plans. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, acting upon instructions of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to repatriate citizens, visited Kuwait International Airport Wednesday to oversee the conclusion of the repatriation plan. “We have



**In line with
Amir’s
instructions**

received today the last plane of the comprehensive repatriation plan in line with instructions of His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince,” His Highness the Prime Minister said while meeting with higher repatriation organizing committee members. He commended the “huge operation and high-level organization



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah attends a meeting on the repatriation plan’s results.

and coordination to implement this comprehensive plan,” which brought together teams from different government departments to repatriate tens of thousands of citizens from five continents. He said the plan included 185 flights for 58 destinations. “We are working amidst a health crisis that has confused the whole world and forced strict health regulations on all sec-

tors, including air transport,” said His Highness the Prime Minister. But, he continued to say, proper planning and collaboration of the Kuwaiti people contributed to honoring His Highness the Amir’s desire to bring back citizens to their home. His Highness the Prime Minister thanked the government departments, civil society organizations like Kuwait Red Crescent

Society and Jazeera Airways for contributing to success of this plan. He voiced content for the safe return of the citizens but urged them to comply with the health authorities’ instructions specially amidst rising number of infections. His Highness the Prime Minister also thanked security, health and services sectors as well as diplomatic missions. — KUNA



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah addresses frontliners with gratitude for their efforts.



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and other officials arrive at the airport to oversee the conclusion of the repatriation plan.

Local

Kuwait cabinet to discuss total lockdown after COVID-19 cases soar

Assembly panel to discuss salary cuts

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Following a steep rise in the number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) cases, especially among Kuwaiti citizens following a sharp drop, the cabinet is expected to reassess the possibility of imposing a total lockdown to stem the spread of the disease.

Local reports said the cabinet is expected to debate the issue and possibly take a decision at the weekend after specialists have recommended a two-week total lockdown to stop the disease.

Osama Al-Enezi, a Kuwaiti specialist physician, said on Twitter yesterday that it appears that the only way to confront the spread of the coronavirus is through a total lockdown for two weeks.

Local medical mathematical studies have shown that based on

the current situation, the coronavirus is expected to reach its peak by the end of May and then begin a long decline that could continue for weeks.

The health ministry has reported a big jump in the number of cases in the past few days and although the largest number remains among expat workers, there has been a steep rise among Kuwaiti citizens probably because of unlawful family gatherings during the fasting months of Ramadan. Kuwait has already put two highly-populated areas; Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, under total lockdown for nearly a month now in a bid to curb the spread of the virus.

In the meantime, the National Assembly's health and labor committee was due to discuss government-sponsored amendments to the labor law in the private sector allowing distress companies to reduce salaries of its staff.

The amendments stipulate that companies which face financial problems because of the measures against the coronavirus, can reduce the salaries of their employees or ask them to take unpaid leave with the manpower authority permission.

The companies can alternatively dismiss their staff or part of them but after paying their full end of service indemnity rights.

MPs have strongly opposed the government move, saying they will not accept any measure that could undermine the rights of workers, especially Kuwaitis. The amendments could be debated during the assembly special session scheduled for next Tuesday.

In the meantime, National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said yesterday that he was informed by the finance minister that the government has no plans to withdraw a draft law allowing the government to borrow KD 20 billion over the next 10 years. Therefore, Ghanem said he sent the draft law to the financial and economic affairs committee to study it. The law has been rejected by a large number of lawmakers.



Govt 'borrowing' law sent to panel

Minister puts end to end of school year speculation

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ministries of Education and Higher Education are committed to a government decision to resume studies at public and private schools, colleges and universities on August 4, 2020, the minister confirmed, ending speculations of ending the academic year due to the virus. Dr Saud Al-Harbi said the two ministries were complying with a February 26 government decision to suspend studies because of the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). There is no intention to end the academic year, Harbi stressed, noting that he would submit a report to the government about this issue in mid-July. Harbi said ministries' executives were meeting regularly to discuss best ways to resume studies as well as launching phase two of the online education. — KUNA

KFSD follows up anti-COVID measures

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Service Directorate's (KFSD) Director General Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mekrad held a video conference meeting recently with directors of the Farwaniya, Sea, Aviation, Shuhada, Jahra, Mishref, Manqaf and Mubarak Al-Kabeer fire stations. During the meeting, he emphasized on the strict compliance with the personal protection, social distancing and use of disinfectants to guarantee protection against COVID-19, in order to avoid any disruption of their vital work. Deputy Director General for the Fire Fighting Sector Maj Gen Jamal Al-Bulaihees was present during the conference call.

162 COVID-19 recoveries, total at 2,381

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Health Minister Dr Basel Al-Sabah announced yesterday the recovery of 162 people from the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), bringing the tally to 2,381. The minister said analyses and medical examinations and tests proved that these cases were cured of the coronavirus. The recovered will be transferred to the hospital recuperation ward, pending their discharge within the next few days, he said. — KUNA

Municipality cancels 1,923 food delivery permits over violations

KUWAIT: Kuwait Municipality Director-General Ahmad Al-Manfouhi announced yesterday the cancellation of 1,923 food delivery permits for violations of health requirements. In a press release, Manfouhi affirmed that this decision came within the framework of the executive mechanism for the service of selling and delivering food orders via an electronic system with the need to adhere to the required terms and conditions. He stressed the incorrectness of information that circulated on social media alleging that the number of people authorized to practice the delivery service exceeded 8,000 workers, indicating that the permits issued by the municipality are subject to strict control. "We will not hesitate to cancel the permit of those who are not committed to the implementation of the Ministry of Health guidelines," he added. — KUNA

News in brief

Co-op workers test positive

KUWAIT: Al-Nuzha Co-op Society announced closing its central market until tomorrow after one of their employees tested positive for coronavirus. The co-op will also suspend the delivery service. Al-Nuzha's customers can shop from the branches in blocks 2 and 3, or at the closest co-op in other areas. Meanwhile, a cashier working for Family Supplies Center at Al-Rumathiya Co-op Society was infected with coronavirus. The co-op announced closing the center and the central market in block 7 yesterday, while reopening them today. Separately, Kuwait Municipality denied social media reports alleging that a delivery service driver tested positive for coronavirus.

Public complaints

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health argued people who have complaints about any problems with medication they bought or used, to send their complaints on the website: <https://eservices.moh.gov.kw/SPCMS/DrugComplaints.a.spx>. Meanwhile, Dr Rana Al-Fares, Minister of Public Works affirmed that the ministry still receives public complaints on emergency hotlines: 150 or 93333150. She added that they received 659 complaints, working on 38, and finished 621 of the received complaints about repairing roads. In the meantime, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry received several complaints regarding the delay in delivering purchased orders from some companies. In this regard, the ministry argued people to send their complaints to WhatsApp at 98725811 to take the necessary actions.

Oil price up

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by \$1.29 to \$21.60 per barrel on Wednesday after it was at \$20.31 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. The price of the Brent crude went down by \$1.25 to \$29.72 per barrel, the same case with the West Texas Intermediate, which down by 57 cents to \$23.99 pb. — KUNA



Iraq gets new govt amid fiscal, COVID

Misinformation flood hampers fight for vaccine in Africa



DUBAI: Laborers wearing protective masks queue in Dubai after authorities of the United Arab Emirates started to ease a national lockdown put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP

UAE's Indian expats frustrated

Indians voiced skepticism about 'massive' operation

DUBAI: Indians in the UAE have voiced skepticism about a "massive" operation announced by New Delhi to bring home some of the hundreds of thousands of nationals stranded by coronavirus restrictions. "It is just propaganda," said Ishan, an Indian expatriate in Dubai, one of seven emirates in the UAE and long a magnet for foreign workers. He was reacting to his government's announcement this week that it would deploy passenger jets and naval ships to bring home citizens stuck in a host of countries.

India's consulate in Dubai said it received about 200,000 requests from nationals seeking repatriation—mostly workers who have lost their jobs in the pandemic. One vessel was heading to the UAE, India's government said, while two flights were scheduled to depart the UAE for India yesterday. But the plans drew scorn from

Ishan, who was a manager at a luxury services company before he was made redundant last month.

"It's like throwing a dog a bone," the 35-year-old complained on Wednesday, dismissing the Indian government's efforts as a drop in the ocean. "Let's say they repatriate 400 people on the first day, and about 5,000 people in 10 days, what difference has it made?" India banned all incoming commercial flights in late March as it imposed one of the world's strictest lockdowns to tackle the spread of coronavirus. The UAE is home to a 3.3-million-strong Indian community, who make up around 30 percent of the Gulf state's population.

'We are upset'

To the anger of some Indian expatriates, the evacuees will have to pay for their passage

“**Government plan is just propaganda**”

home and spend two weeks in quarantine on arrival. "We are upset over the failure of our government," Ishan said. "What about the people with no money? How are you helping them?" The Indian consulate could not be reached for comment. Ibrahim Khalil, head of the Kerala Muslim Cultural Center in Dubai, said the consulate had asked him to select 100

Indian nationals for repatriation. "We are planning to pay for the tickets of those who cannot afford it," he said, adding that the elderly, pregnant and those suffering from illnesses were a priority.

But one Indian woman, eight months pregnant in the neighboring emirate of Sharjah, was not one of the lucky ones chosen to go back home in one of Thursday's planned departures. "We called them but nobody would pick up," the 26-year-old, who requested anonymity, told AFP. She arrived in the UAE a few months ago to visit her husband, who lives in a shared apartment with another family to save money. "We have no insurance here and the medical expenses are too costly," said the woman, who was anxious to leave to give birth at home. "I just hope that I am chosen to go back to India. I don't know why I haven't been considered." — AFP

International

Coronavirus 'takes flavor out of Ramadan' in North Africa

Restrictions deprive Muslims of traditional gatherings

ALGIERS: North Africans say they are missing the taste of Ramadan, as coronavirus restrictions deprive them of traditional mealtimes, evening outings and beloved sweets during the Muslim holy month. "It's not the usual Ramadan," said one woman shopping in Ariana, near the capital Tunis, looking desperately for the cakes and sweets that normally fill the stalls during the fasting month. Ramadan is traditionally a time for worship and socializing.

The faithful refrain from consuming food and water during the day, breaking their fast at dusk with family and friends for a meal known as *iftar*, and often going out afterwards. But this year, social distancing measures have largely put a stop to the usual Ramadan traditions. Mosques in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia have been closed to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, preventing special evening prayers.

There are no long nights of musical gatherings, and in the medina of Tunis, there are no Sufi-inspired "hadra" chants and no "stambali" - a mystical trance dance ritual. The old cities of Rabat, Casablanca and Tunis, normally crowded after *iftar*, are like ghost towns. "Even the meals that bring all the family together around the same table are impossible - I'm afraid for my parents, who are elderly and sick", said Maissa, a 46-year-old teacher from Algiers. "The coronavirus has taken all the flavour out of the holy month this year," said the mother-of-four.

'Unprecedented'

In Morocco, dates - a Ramadan staple - and sweets are still available at the markets or in supermarkets. "But I can't travel to have *iftar* at my parents' place" due to the night-time curfew, lamented one 35-year-old teacher who lives alone in Marrakesh. "No cafes, no people in the mosques... it's unprecedented", he said. In Algeria, after businesses were allowed to reopen at the start of Ramadan in April, crowding led authorities to reimpose



RABAT: A woman, covering her mouth, shops at the central market during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in the Moroccan capital Rabat. — AFP

closures in some areas.

Some in the capital Algiers travelled to Boufarik - around 30 kilometers away in Blida province, the epicenter of the country's virus outbreak in early March - for a sugary sweet known as *zlabia*. One man, Salem, said that in 30 years he had never failed to have *zlabia* from Boufarik on the table for Ramadan, but this year he came back empty-handed. "Most of the stalls are closed and those that are open are crowded, so I turned back", the 51-year-old said.

Authorities in Algeria have even prohibited community

restaurants and soup kitchens where volunteers serve meals to the poor during the holy month. Fekhreddine Zerrouki said his charity organization had planned to serve more than 1,500 meals a day, but was doing deliveries instead. Samir, a volunteer with the Algerian Red Crescent, said the number of people benefiting from such Ramadan charity initiatives was "very low compared to the number of people in need". "We are missing the taste of Ramadan because of the lack of *zlabia* or the lost evenings, but some people don't even have dates for breaking their fast", he said. — AFP

UAE calls for de-escalation in the region

DUBAI: A senior United Arab Emirates official on Wednesday stressed the need for de-escalation in the region to allow countries to focus on "the hurricane" caused by the coronavirus pandemic and review development models. Earlier on Wednesday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani threatened a "crushing response" if the United States goes ahead with plans to extend an embargo on Iranian trade of conventional arms, which the United Nations is set to lift later this year.

Asked during a webinar organized by Beirut Institute Summit whether there was concern that Iran may provoke a confrontation in the region, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said: "We need to really concentrate on de-escalation." "The region, like all regions in the world, is going to be financially and politically weaker. We would be wise to think about our development models, about de-escalation and to try some problem-solving," Gargash said.

Under Iran's deal with world powers to accept

limits to its nuclear program in return for lifting of sanctions, a U.N. weapons embargo is due to expire in October. Washington, which exited the deal in 2018, says it wants to extend the embargo. Gargash said countries would be focused inwards on the ramifications of the pandemic that disrupted business globally.

He said Gulf energy producers, also hit by a collapse in oil prices, would need to accelerate economic diversification plans. "We will have a lot of questions about what constitutes a Gulf rentier state model. We've been for many years trying to escape that model with varying degrees of success, but I think this is going to accelerate the necessity for us to find something a little bit more sustainable," Gargash said. He said labor market imbalances have also emerged as a major issue though it was "too early" for any restructuring.

Millions of foreigners form the backbone of Gulf economies and work in vital sectors like construction, transport, retail, hospitality and tourism. This includes low-income migrant workers living in overcrowded accommodations that have become hot spots for the virus. "The Gulf has depended on a large number of blue-collar expatriates ... Is this model that has been part and parcel of the development model in the region since the 1950s and maybe before, is this sustainable the same way, should it be tweaked or not?" Gargash said.

Tribal clashes in Sudan's South Darfur kill 30

KHARTOUM: Thirty people were killed in tribal clashes that erupted in Sudan's South Darfur province, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok's office said Wednesday in a brief statement. "South Darfur's governor presented a detailed report about the situation in the province which showed that clashes erupting between tribal elements saw 30 deaths," it said.

A tribal source told AFP that the bloody fighting between the al-Raziqat (Arab) and al-Falata (African) tribes was sparked by a dispute over stolen livestock. "Nine people were initially killed at night and then 21 people were killed in renewed clashes on Wednesday morning. The situation is extremely on edge, but fighting stopped as night fell," said the source, who wanted to remain anonymous.

Tensions between Arab and African tribes in Darfur date back to 2003, when ethnic minority rebels took up arms against the then

Arab-dominated government of since-ousted president Omar al-Bashir, accusing it of marginalizing the region economically and politically. Khartoum then applied what rights groups say was a scorched-earth policy against ethnic groups suspected of supporting the rebels-rape, killing, looting and burning villages.

About 300,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million displaced in the conflict, the United Nations says. South Darfur's governor Khaled Hashem told reporters on Wednesday that military troops were being deployed to the region to quell the outbreak of violence. The current transitional government has sought to turn the page on Bashir's three decades of iron-fisted rule, which ended when he was overthrown in mass protests in April last year.

One way they want to do this is by bringing an end to the multiple ethnic conflicts that have dogged Sudan almost continuously since independence in 1956. In February, Sudan's transitional authorities agreed to transfer Bashir to stand trial before the International Criminal Court based in The Hague. The United Nations warned in a March report that even though armed rebel activity has declined, intercommunal tensions must be resolved in order to avert further violence. — AFP

International

Iraq gets new government amid fiscal, COVID-19 crises

Mustafa Kadhemi takes office as Iraq's PM

BAGHDAD: Mustafa Kadhemi took office as Iraq's premier yesterday after breaking months of political deadlock, taking the reins amid a staggering economic crisis, a health pandemic and the specter of renewed protests. Observing social distancing to curb the spread of the coronavirus, lawmakers gathered at parliament in masks and gloves around 9:00 pm local time, but the vote was delayed for hours to make last-minute edits to ministerial posts.

Kadhemi soon received a congratulatory call from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who announced a 120-day waiver extension on US sanctions to let Iraq buy gas from neighboring Iran. The waiver is "a display of our desire to help provide the right conditions for success," the State Department said. Kadhemi's nomination came after weeks of lobbying deeply divided political parties, including those close to neighboring Iran who had been wary of his ties to the United States.

One hardline faction had accused Kadhemi of conspiring with Washington over the January drone strike that killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis outside Baghdad airport. MPs approved 15 ministers out of a prospective 22-seat cabinet, with seven ministries - including the key oil and foreign affairs positions - still empty as political parties squabble over shares.

Kadhemi, the 53-year-old former head of the respected National Intelligence Service (INIS), was nominated by President Barham Saleh on April 9 - the third attempt to replace outgoing premier Adel Abdel Mahdi. Abdel Mahdi, 77, resigned late last year following months of protests decrying rampant corruption, unemployment and a political class seen as beholden to neighboring Iran. He became the first premier to step down since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, but stayed on as caretaker PM in the absence of a successor.

A partial government

The new PM appeared to have brought Iran-aligned factions on board, with endorsements from both Soleimani's successor as Quds Force chief Ismail Qaani, and from Mohammed Kawtharani, the pointman on Iraqi affairs for powerful Iran-backed Lebanese movement Hezbollah. The ministers who were approved included those for the sensitive portfolios of finance, interior, defense, health and electricity - securing the majority that Kadhemi needed for his cabinet to be considered viable. The new body is meant to hold early elections seen as an opportunity for a political reset for the country, but it will also face urgent policy priorities.

Iraq's GDP is set to shrink by 9.7 percent this year and poverty rates may double, making it the



BAGHDAD: Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhemi (left - at podium in blue) and his government in front of other members of parliament seen during an overnight session in parliament in Baghdad. — AFP

country's worst annual performance since 2003, the World Bank has warned. The enormous deficit brought on by collapsing crude prices may force the cabinet to trim salaries for state workers, potentially sparking new anti-government rallies. Meanwhile the coronavirus pandemic has killed more than 100 Iraqis, and the country's dilapidated health system is at risk of being overwhelmed by a spike in cases.

Kadhemi will also have to resolve budget and oil disputes with the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, and lead a strategic dialogue with the United States in June over economic and military ties. In the phone call, Pompeo mentioned talks with Kadhemi and agreed on "working together to provide the Iraqi people the prosperity and security they deserve," the State Department said. — AFP

Trump vetoes a resolution limiting war powers in Iran

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday vetoed what he called a "very insulting" congressional resolution seeking to limit his war powers in Iran. In a statement, Trump said he had used his veto because the resolution — a rare bipartisan rebuke to the president approved in March — was based on "misunderstandings of facts and law." The measure stemmed from fears among both Trump's Republicans and Democrats that the White House was stumbling into war with the Islamic republic.

In the statement, Trump says Congress misinterpreted his constitutional authority as being limited to "defense of the United States and its forces against imminent attack." "That is incorrect," he said. "We live in a hostile world of evolving threats, and the Constitution recognizes that the President must be able to anticipate our adversaries' next moves and take swift and decisive action in response. That's what I did!" The resolution said the US president cannot commit his military to hostilities against Iran or any part of its government or military without explicit authorization from Congress. Supporters said they wanted to ensure that Congress had the unique power to declare war, as outlined in the US Constitution. Trump has preached the need for a draw-down of American military entanglements abroad, but has ramped up a hostile relationship with Iran. His administration has imposed crippling economic sanctions on Tehran. —AFP

Israel: Over year of political crisis

JERUSALEM: Israel's Supreme Court on Wednesday approved a coalition deal between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his rival-turned-ally Benny Gantz, paving the way for a unity government to be sworn in next week. Here is a recap of the saga:

Election on the horizon

On December 24, 2018, Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party announces that all the parties in the ruling coalition have agreed to hold legislative elections in April 2019. Two days later, the Knesset, Israel's parliament, votes to dissolve itself.

Impasse

In polls organized on April 9, 2019, Netanyahu - Israel's longest serving prime minister, in power since 2009 - hopes to get re-elected despite being dogged by corruption allegations. Netanyahu's Likud and the Blue and White alliance of ex-military chief and centrist challenger Gantz finish neck and neck. Parliament chooses Netanyahu, who has support from smaller right-wing parties, to try to form a majority government. But after weeks of political bargaining, he is unable to command a majority in the 120-seat parliament. The deadline expires and the Knesset agrees to hold a new election.

Another deadlock

In the next election on September 17, exit polls show another neck-and-neck race. Two days later, in a surprise, Netanyahu proposes a unity government to Gantz, who insists

he would have to be the prime minister. Official results released on September 25 confirm a deadlock, putting Gantz's party at 33 seats against Likud's 32. Even with their respective allies, neither can muster the 61 seats needed for a majority. President Reuven Rivlin tasks Netanyahu with forming a government within 28 days. Gantz refuses to join Netanyahu, citing his potential indictment on corruption charges. On October 21, Netanyahu announces he has failed. Rivlin hands the task to Gantz.

On November 20, Gantz informs Rivlin hours before his deadline that he too has been unable to form a government. The following day, the attorney general charges Netanyahu with bribery, fraud and breach of trust. It is the first time a sitting prime minister is to be put on trial in Israel. Netanyahu rejects the charges, saying it is an attempt to remove him from government. On December 11, as the deadline passes for parliament to find a head of government, lawmakers call a new election for March 2, 2020.

Third election within a year

On election day, Likud wins the most seats - 36 against 33 for Gantz's party. On March 15, an Israeli court postpones Netanyahu's graft trial amid fears of the spread of the new coronavirus. The following day, Gantz, backed by 61 lawmakers, is nominated to try to form a new government, but fails. On March 26, Gantz is elected parliament speaker, raising fresh hopes of a unity government. On April 16, Rivlin tasks parliament with forming a government after a deadline expires without the two sides reaching agreement. The two camps announce, however, that negotiations have resumed. On April 19, thousands of Israelis demonstrate in Tel Aviv to warn against what they say is a threat to democracy posed by the talks. On April 20, Netanyahu and Gantz say they have agreed to form an emergency unity government. —AFP

International

Misinformation flood hampers fight for virus vaccine in Africa

Vaccine seen as 'plot to kill black people'

DAKAR: The task of introducing a vaccine for the coronavirus faces an uphill struggle in Africa, where a flood of online misinformation is feeding on mistrust of Western medical research. Across the continent, Facebook, WhatsApp and other platforms have been swamped by messaging that characterizes vaccine research as harmful or even part of a plot to kill black people. The world's poorest continent - and the most vulnerable to the disease, given its poor health infrastructure - Africa has recorded more than 48,000 COVID-19 cases, 1,900 of which have been fatal, according to an AFP tally as of Wednesday.

The toll is below that of other continents, although the true figure may be considerably higher, given the lack of access to testing. The absence of a cure has sparked a flurry of claims for purported remedies. They range from consuming onions and ginger and drinking one's urine to a herbal formula touted by Madagascar President Andry Rajoelina — assertions that fly in the face of stern scientific warnings.

But it is the quest for a vaccine that has sparked particularly toxic disinformation, an investigation by AFP Fact Check has found. In Senegal, a rumor that seven children died after being given a COVID-19 vaccine was shared thousands of times in Facebook posts in English and French. In a video showing a crowd gathered in a Dakar street near a parked police car, a female voiceover presents the footage like a

news report, explaining that the children "dropped dead" after receiving the vaccine.

AFP found that the disturbance was in fact triggered when locals mistook a door-to-door cosmetics salesman for a health ministry worker. The government said that no children have died from a coronavirus vaccine. Another post shared on Facebook and Twitter refers to a US government experiment that started in the 1930s and saw health workers withhold treatment from black men with syphilis to study the disease.

In 40 years, 28 of the test subjects died of syphilis and another 100 died of complications. "US government offers free healthcare to southern rural blacks. Intentionally injects them with syphilis. Still want a corona vaccine?" the post reads, next to a photograph of black men in flat caps and dungarees waiting to be seen by white health workers. And in another post widely shared around Africa, an illustration shows a black woman brandishing a machete towards a white doctor performing an injection.

Long history of mistrust

Experts point to entrenched suspicions in Africa that the continent's role is to be a test bench for novel drugs. "There is a long history of mistrust," Keymanthri Moodley, director of the Centre for Medical Ethics and Law at South Africa's Stellenbosch University said. This explains why comments made last month by two



LAGOS: Motorists queue in a traffic gridlock as commercial activities return at the end of a five-week COVID-19 coronavirus lockdown in Lagos. — AFP

French researchers had an outsized impact south of the Sahara, Moodley said. On television, the pair discussed the benefits of holding drug trials in Africa. Jean-Paul Mira, head of intensive care at the Cochin hospital in Paris, suggested testing

a vaccine in Africa "where there are no masks, no treatment, no intensive care, rather as was done with certain studies on AIDS, where things are tested on prostitutes because it's known that they are highly exposed". — AFP

How coronavirus is changing daily life in Nairobi

NAIROBI: Since Kenya confirmed its first coronavirus case on March 13, authorities have adopted various measures to curb the spread of the virus while stopping short of imposing a full lockdown. AFP spent a day this week exploring how the measures are impacting the capital Nairobi and its 4.3 million inhabitants, as the health crisis exacerbates social inequalities and batters the economy of the regional powerhouse.

6:45 am, police checkpoint

The sun has just risen and morning mist envelops a valley on the outskirts of Nairobi. On this road heading north towards the Rift Valley region armed police monitor vehicles and pedestrians. "The only people who can go through are the ones with the authorization: the lorries carrying food, doctors, etc.," explains police inspector Julius Kariuki Mugo. Edward, a 25-year-old driver, shows a stamped pass from his boss that enables him to continue on his route to deliver flour to a town 75 kilometers northwest.

Since April 6 Kenya has blocked movement in



NAIROBI: A policeman inspects the identification and travel papers of a man looking to cross the border between the Nairobi Metropolitan area and Limuru in Limuru. Since April 6, 2020, Kenya has blocked movement in and out of Nairobi, three coastal towns, and the north-eastern county of Mandera. — AFP

and out of Nairobi, three coastal towns, and the northeastern county of Mandera. Two refugee camps have also been cordoned off, as well as one suburb in Nairobi and one in Mombasa. After initially creeping up slowly, virus cases this week began to jump, with authorities fearing rampant community transmission in slums and poor areas of the capital and second city Mombasa. There have been 582 cases and 26 deaths, and Health Minister Mutahi Kagwe has urged citizens not to make a "mockery" of two months of efforts as social distancing fatigue sets in.

8:30 am, central Nairobi

Normally congested during rush hour, central Nairobi is quiet. In a store that sells bicycle spare parts, brothers N Shah and S Shah, both in their fifties, are feeling the impact of the pandemic on the economy. "We're doing 10 percent of our usual business," says N Shah. "People don't have money. If you don't have money to pay your rent, you don't have money for shopping," says S Shah. Their neighbor, AJ Shah, does not know how he will pay his rent and the salaries of his four employees with business at "around 15 percent" of its normal level. His shop sells food and cleaning products to hotels and restaurants. Even if hotels reopen, it is unclear who would actually stay in them. "The crisis is hitting everywhere," he says. "Who is going to come to visit the wildlife?"

11:00 am, physiotherapy

Since mid-March, Kenyan authorities have closed schools and encouraged working from home, which many have taken up. But it does not make sense for everyone. "For us, working from home is not an option," says Victoria Choi, who runs a physiotherapy practice in the Westlands neighborhood with her husband Bernard. Only one client is allowed in the office at a time, and all must use hand sanitizer and wear masks. Like many parents, Bernard and Victoria have rearranged their schedules to take care of their two youngest children—girls aged 15 and nine. Their social lives have also taken a hit. "I miss going out with the boys,"

Bernard says, adding that "having a beer alone in the house in front of the television" is not exactly a substitute.

1:00 pm, Java cafe

An institution in Nairobi, the Java chain of restaurants has continued operating, albeit at a much reduced pace. "We've been affected a lot since we're only doing takeaways" and home deliveries, explains Pamela Gavala, deputy manager of this franchise. Java, with 2,500 employees in total and 50 restaurants in Nairobi alone, plans to reopen gradually after the government last week approved a supervised resumption of restaurant activity. To comply with the new rules, employees must be tested for COVID-19 and customers must undergo temperature screening. Once inside, no more than two people can sit at tables which have been spaced out to allow for physical distancing.

3:00 pm, Foodplus supermarket

Grocery stores, one of the few sectors still booming during the pandemic, have also had to make changes. Masks are required, thermal screening takes place at the entrance and shopping carts are regularly wiped down with disinfectant. At the registers, markers on the ground indicate where customers must stand to keep an appropriate distance. "They're more than cooperative," Daniel Mutuku, the manager of the Foodplus store in the Kilimani neighborhood said of customers. — AFP

International

Fear keeps US undocumented from hospitals despite COVID

Fear of deportation; fear of facing unpayable bill

NEW YORK: Fear of deportation. Fear of facing an unpayable bill. Fear of becoming a “public charge” and unable to obtain legal status. These are some of the reasons why undocumented migrants are avoiding hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many have contracted the disease and died, and the novel coronavirus is spreading with little check in the community.

Case in point: the undocumented and jobless ex-husband of Victoria, a Mexican nanny living in New York City. The 69-year-old man had kidney problems and diabetes, and died last week after becoming ill with COVID-19. “He was very ill but did not want to go to the hospital,” said Victoria, who did not want to give her last name. “After two weeks, when he could no longer walk or breathe, my daughter took the risk, loaded him into the car and drove him there. He died three weeks later.” Victoria’s ex-husband lived in nearby New Jersey with 12 other immigrants—all of whom were infected with the novel coronavirus.

“Public charge”

New York, where nearly 20,000 people have died of COVID-19, is the epicenter of the US virus pandemic. Latinos and African-Americans are the principal victims, experiencing a

mortality rate nearly double of that of white Americans. The pandemic is especially hard on the 11 million undocumented Latino migrants in the United States. Many are “essential workers” laboring in supermarkets and in clean-up crews, or in jobs like meatpacking, and are exposed to contagion. Only 16 percent can work from home, according to US Department of Labor figures. Many live in tight quarters with roommates and have underlying chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes and hypertension. Often they lack health insurance and have little education. Some don’t even speak English. They don’t get unemployment benefits and can’t expect the \$1,200 federal coronavirus stimulus check, even though they all pay taxes.

Some states have offered help: California will hand out a \$500 one-time payment to 150,000 undocumented migrants. In New York, thanks to help from George Soros’s Open Society Foundations, some 20,000 undocumented migrants will get \$400. But this hardly addresses the needs of the 2.5 million such migrants in both states. “My community doesn’t have the luxury of escaping to a second house in the Hamptons. They have to stay here and they have to work,” said New York Councilman Francisco Moya, in reference to the seaside communities that rich New Yorkers fled to



NEW YORK: People in need line up at a food distribution center organized by New York Assembly member Catalina Cruz and World Central Kitchen in the Corona neighborhood of Queens amid the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City. — AFP

when the pandemic hit. Moya represents three of the neighborhoods worst affected by the pandemic in New York. Since the start of President Donald Trump’s administration the federal government “put anti-immigrant policies in place that makes immigrants fear going to the hospital,” he told AFP. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have said that, with few exceptions, they are not arresting people at hospitals. Nevertheless “there’s that fear,” said Jae Young Kim with the Bronx Legal Services, a group that offers free legal

aid to migrants. Kim said that her clients are especially worried about Trump’s new “public charge” rule that makes it hard for migrants to obtain legal status if they use public benefits like food stamps or seek emergency medical care. The rule offers an exception for COVID-19 cases—but many migrants don’t know about this, or simply don’t trust the government. In California’s Coachella valley, 26 year-old Rosa, who lost her job harvesting cauliflowers, said that if she gets sick with the virus the last place that she’ll go will be the hospital. — AFP

Indonesia’s Ramadan school moves online

JAKARTA: Each year during the fasting month of Ramadan, Indonesian tutor Ahmad Winardi has taught a special course for students in the world’s biggest Muslim-majority country to deepen their knowledge of Islam. But this year, the novel coronavirus has brought a Ramadan like never before, with shuttered mosques and strict physical distancing regulations, and so Winardi has moved his Islamic studies online.

One consequence is that the courses, previously held only in cities on the islands of Java and Sumatra, have this year attracted a wider range of students in the archipelago, including from Indonesian Borneo. “Due to COVID-19, we’re restricted from activities outside our houses so we started the online Islamic course,” said Gemia Indria, one of the organizers.

“And it turns out online teaching removes geographical barriers, so we can reach out to more participants.” Known as “Pesantran Kilat”, which loosely translates as “intensive Islamic boarding school”, the course teaches students about Islam, as well as creative ways to recite the Koran, such as through hand gestures. The gestures, Winardi explained, can act as fun prompts to help primary school students, most aged from 6 to 12 years old, recall religious verses. “The chemistry is absolutely different as we don’t meet in person,” Winardi said of the online lessons. “But we try some ice-breaking activities, such as shouting ‘God is greatest’.” — AFP

Bitcoin world faces ‘halving’: What’s happening?

LONDON: Bitcoin miners, whose computer processors enable the running of the world’s most popular virtual currency, will soon face an event that takes place every four years and alters the profitability of the hi-tech industry. So-called halving is when cryptocurrency-mining companies and individuals find out the reduced payment that they will receive in return for their contribution to the system’s smooth operation. Bitcoin was created in 2008 by a person or group writing under the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto as a peer-to-peer decentralized electronic cash system. The virtual unit was once the preserve of internet geeks and hobbyists but it has since exploded in popularity, with mining performed by huge banks of computers.

How does mining work?

Bitcoins are traded via a decentralised registry system known as a blockchain. The system requires massive computer processing power in order to manage and implement transactions. That power is provided by miners, who do so in the hope they will receive new bitcoins for validating transaction data. The system poses a complex computer puzzle to decide which miner wins the privilege to validate the block and thus receive the reward. “To understand halving, it is important to remember the role of miners, who are basically responsible for the bitcoin network security,” ThinkMarkets analyst Fawad Razaqzada told AFP. “Each time a block of bitcoin transaction takes place, they need to be verified by miners. The miner that verifies each block

gets a reward for its work with more, newly created, bitcoins.”

What is halving?

This occurs every four years and basically involves the halving of the reward from bitcoin mining. The cryptocurrency’s first “halving” occurred in November 2012, and the second in July 2016. The third is widely expected to take place around next Tuesday. “Halving will impact profitability of mining bitcoin because work and resources will need to double in order to achieve the same reward as before,” added Razaqzada. “However, if the value of bitcoin appreciates significantly then this will offset some of the costs.” Commercial mining operations often occupy huge hangers or warehouses, and consume large amounts of electricity to power and cool the computers, which is a considerable cost in addition to equipment.

Why reduce the reward?

The reward was originally set at 50 bitcoins but it was subsequently reduced to 12.5 and will likely reach just 6.25 next week. The amount has been trimmed over time in order to implement an overall global limit of 21 million bitcoins. “With the supply of bitcoins mandated to eventually reach the limit of 21 million, the creator(s) of the digital currency had decided that these rewards must decay exponentially, otherwise supply will not be controlled,” added Razaqzada. “So, the network is programmed to cut the reward every 210,000 blocks, or about every four years,” he said, noting that the halving date depended on mining activity.

Bitcoin stood late Tuesday at \$9,200 after a choppy few months linked to coronavirus markets turmoil. That compares with \$7,100 at the start of the year, according to Bloomberg data, but it remains far from the record high \$19,511 hit in December 2017. “February and March were rough months for bitcoin like other risk assets, but the digital currency has staged the most impressive recovery,” said Razaqzada. — AFP

International

Captured US 'mercenaries' to be tried: Venezuela's Maduro

US vows to 'use every tool available' to bring them home

CARACAS: Venezuela will try two Americans allegedly captured during a failed bid by mercenaries to invade the country, President Nicolas Maduro said Wednesday, as the US vowed to "use every tool available" to bring them home. Venezuela announced Monday that it had arrested the two former US special forces soldiers on suspicion of trying to topple Maduro in an operation supported by the US-backed opposition.

"They are convicts, confessed, caught red-handed and are being judged by the republic's attorney general, by Venezuela's civil courts, and the process will be full of guarantees and fair," said Maduro. The leader of the crisis-wracked South American country insisted the Americans, identified as Luke Denman and Airan Berry, were being "well treated, with respect." Maduro showed the passports of Denman, 34, and Berry, 41, on state television. The US army has confirmed they were former members of the Green Berets who were deployed to Iraq. In Washington, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the government would "use every tool that we have available to try to get them back." US President Donald Trump had denied any involvement by his administration with the mission, and Washington accused Maduro of launching a "disinformation campaign."

Russia, a close ally of Maduro's, hit out at Trump on Wednesday and described his denials as "unconvincing." Venezuela's Attorney General Tarek William Saab said Monday that opposition leader Juan Guaido, who is backed by the US and more than 50 countries, had signed a \$212 million contract

with "hired mercenaries" using funds seized by the United States from the state oil company PDVSA.

Denman and Berry are among 17 people arrested for allegedly being part of an invasion force that was intercepted early Sunday just off the coast, about 40 minutes from the capital Caracas.

Another eight alleged attackers were killed. "They have confessed their guilt, they broke international law, they broke Venezuelan law," Maduro said. "They're in the hands of justice now and we guarantee there will be justice in this case with these two Americans and with the rest of the mercenaries, and that the truth will come out."

The president repeated his accusation that Trump was directly behind the attack, claiming he contracted with a former US army medic, Jordan Goudreau, to train the mercenary force. "President Donald Trump is the direct leader of the whole incursion," said Maduro, who showed a video in which Denman confesses he was hired by Goudreau for the mission, which first aimed to take control of the international airport in Caracas. Maduro described the raid as a "remake" of the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, when Cuban exiles covertly financed and directed by the US government attempted to overthrow then Cuba leader Fidel Castro.

Pompeo mocked Maduro's claims, saying that if the United States "had been involved, it would have gone differently." Canadian-born Goudreau, an Iraq and Afghanistan veteran, has admitted the existence of the operation in a video, and claims the private security firm he runs, Silvercorp USA, was con-



CARACAS: Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro shows the passports of two US citizens arrested by security forces during a video conference meeting with international media correspondents, at Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas, on Wednesday. —AFP

tracted by Venezuela's opposition. He told The Washington Post that he hired Denman and Berry as "supervisors" and had known them for years. In the video, Goudreau shows what he claims is a contract signed by Guaido, whose press team subsequently denied having any agreements with private security firms.

Maduro—who has also accused the president of neighboring Colombia, Ivan Duque, of involvement—said he would ask the United States to extradite Goudreau. The Trump administration has repeatedly

claimed that "all options are on the table" when discussing possible measures to help Guaido force Maduro from office. Washington has also ramped up sanctions against Maduro, top members of his government, and PDVSA. Venezuela, which is almost entirely dependent on its oil revenues, is reeling from six years of recession, with millions of people facing a shortage of basic necessities. Poverty has soared while around five million people have fled the country, according to United Nations figures. —AFP

US officials warn against COVID parties

LOS ANGELES: Officials in the northwestern US state of Washington on Wednesday expressed concern over reports of people organizing "COVID-19 parties" to intentionally spread the virus.

"Gathering in groups in the midst of this pandemic can be incredibly dangerous and puts people at increased risk for hospitalization and even death," warned John Wiesman, the state's secretary of health. "Furthermore, it is unknown if people who recover from COVID-19 have long-term protection," he said. "There is still a lot we don't know about this virus, including any long-term health issues which may occur after infection."

Wiesman's comments came after officials in Walla Walla County, located 260 miles (420 kilometers) southeast of Seattle, reported that some of the nearly 100 cases in the region appear to have been intentionally spread or contracted at so-called "COVID-19 parties."

The aim of these gatherings is for non-infected peo-

ple to mingle with an infected person in an effort to catch the virus. "This kind of unnecessary behavior may create a preventable uptick in cases which further slows our state's ability to gradually re-open," Wiesman said.

As of Wednesday, there were 94 cases of coronavirus reported in Walla Walla county and one death. Meghan DeBolt, Walla Walla's community health director, said contact tracing had shown that some of those infected had attended parties with the aim of contracting the virus. "We don't know when it is happening. It's after the fact that we hear from cases," she told the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin. "We ask about contacts, and there are 25 people because: 'We were at a COVID party.'"

She said such behavior was irresponsible and urged residents in a Facebook message to follow proper physical and social distancing measures to prevent community transmission. "We need to use this time to use good common sense and to be smart as we move through this pandemic so that we can begin to reopen our community," she said. "COVID-19 parties: not part of the solution," she added.

There has so far been only one other report in the United States of a coronavirus party.

In March, Kentucky's Governor Andy Beshear announced that a person had contracted the virus after attending a COVID-19 party. The United States is the country hardest hit by the pandemic with more than 1.2 million cases so far and 73,095 deaths. —AFP

Nearly 1 in 5 US children left hungry since crisis

WASHINGTON: Nearly a fifth of young children in the United States are not getting enough to eat since the coronavirus pandemic erupted, according to research out Wednesday highlighting the broader health impact of the crisis. The Brookings Institution report said a survey found that 17.4 percent of mothers with children aged 12 or under reported that their offspring were not eating enough due to lack of money.

"It is clear that young children are experiencing food insecurity to an extent unprecedented in modern times," said lead researcher Lauren Bauer. "Food insecurity in households with children under 18 has increased by about 130 percent from 2018 to today," she added. The survey to measure the consequences of the COVID-19

pandemic uncovered figures worse than during the financial crisis of 2008. Bauer described the results as "alarming," telling the New York Times that households were cutting back on portion sizes and kids were being forced to skip meals.

Disrupted school meal programs could also be factor, she said, with families not collecting meals from distribution sites and older siblings competing for limited supplies at home. Bauer called for the government to increase food security programs and boost benefit levels. At least 30 million American workers have lost their jobs in the economic shutdown imposed to thwart the spread of the virus. The April employment report, due out Friday, is expected to show the jobless rate soaring—perhaps as high as 20 percent—reaching levels not seen since the Great Depression last century. The new coronavirus has infected nearly 1.2 million people in the United States and killed around 72,000, and analysts fear some of the economic damage may be long-term. —AFP

International

India's virus infections jump past 50,000, fueled by Mumbai, Delhi

Death toll rises to 1,783 as new infections show no signs of abating

NEW DELHI: Coronavirus cases in India rose past 50,000, the health ministry said yesterday, with the pace of new infections showing no signs of abating despite a strict weeks-long lockdown in the world's second-most populous country.

India added 3,561 cases, taking its total 52,952 - behind over 82,000 in China where the virus originated - while the death toll rose by 89 to 1,783, still low compared with the United States, United Kingdom and Italy. Officials attributed the low toll to the government's move to impose a stay-at-home order on the nation's 1.3 billion people early in the cycle, but noted a spurt in cases from the densely packed economic centers of Mumbai, Delhi and Ahmedabad.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said Maharashtra, the state where Mumbai is located, was an area of particular concern and said the federal government stood ready to help.

"The (government) is ready to help in every way possible - be it manpower increase, capacity building, technical assistance etc. or any kind of handholding that is required to manage the situation," he said at a meeting with state health officials. India this week allowed some economic activity to restart in less-affected parts of the hinterland to reduce the pain for hundreds of thousands of people out of work for weeks and running short of food and cash.

But the spreading contagion will increase the

pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to keep restrictions in place so it does not spin out of control and overwhelm the limited public health system.

India has reported an average of around 2,800 cases each day over the past week. By comparison, China has reported new cases in the single digits over the same period. Infectious diseases experts have also expressed concern that official data in India is not capturing the full extent of the crisis. The infection numbers in India fall far short of the United States, which has 1.2 million cases and is nearing 75,000 deaths despite a much smaller population.

While the federal lockdown is due to end on May 17, authorities in south-central Telangana state decided to extend the lockdown till May 29 in a bid to flatten the curve of infections before opening up fully. "The people themselves have asked for an extension," said chief minister K.Chandrashekhar Rao.

India, along with the United States, Russia and Brazil, was among big countries that had not yet been able to slow the pace of new infections, said Shamika Ravi, a Brookings senior fellow and a former member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council.

"Their current strategies (contact tracing + testing + containment) are ineffective," she said. —Reuters



NEW DELHI: A Delhi government doctor (left) briefs stranded migrant workers before boarding a train for Madhya Pradesh at a camp after the government eased a nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in New Delhi yesterday. —AFP

HK customs seize 26 tons of shark fins

HONG KONG: Hong Kong has seized 26 tons of smuggled shark fins, sliced from some 38,500 endangered animals, in the largest bust of its kind in the southern Chinese city. The record haul was discovered in two containers from Ecuador, and highlights the continued demand for shark fin, which is served at wedding banquets in many Chinese communities. The city's customs department unveiled the haul on Wednesday and said it smashed previous records.

"Each consignment consisting of 13 tons broke the previous record seizure of 3.8 tonnes of controlled shark fins made in 2019," customs official Danny Cheung told reporters. Most of the fins came from thresher and silky sharks, both endangered species. A 57-year-old man was arrested but has been released on bail pending further enquiries. Some of the ocean's most vital apex predators, shark populations have been decimated over the last few decades with finning and industrial long line fishing the main culprits. Fishing fleets often cut the fin from the shark and then and throw the fatally maimed animal back in the sea to maximize profit.

The dried fins sell for considerable sums and are usually served in a glutinous soup at banquets. The sale and consumption of shark fin is not illegal in Hong Kong, but must be licensed. Years of campaigning by environmentalists and celebrities like Chinese basketball star Yao Ming have led to the dish becoming less fashionable among younger consumers in China, Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan. —AFP

Indonesia team creates \$1,000 ventilator

BANDUNG, Indonesia: A team of Indonesian engineers working around the clock says it has produced in two months a compact ventilator to sell at a fraction of the usual cost, hoping to accelerate the fight against east Asia's second-deadliest COVID-19 outbreak.

Like many other countries, Indonesia faces a shortage of the vital mechanical breathing devices to treat people with the pandemic disease. Using household materials such as plastic drinking tumblers to make parts, the 40 engineers from the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) developed the Vent-I ventilator that is the size of a mini-oven, said team leader Syarif Hidayat.

The institute aims to sell the machines for less than 15 million rupiah (\$1,000) each, one-twentieth or less than the typical \$20,000 to \$25,000, he said. "The structure of this ventilator is much simpler compared to the ventilator that we see in the intensive care unit," said Hidayat, a 57-year-old lecturer at the university. Indonesia, where infections of the coronavirus now exceed 12,000, has 8,413 ventilators in 2,867 hospitals across the archipelago, Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto said last month.

That is far from enough for the 180,000 ICUs that Indonesia will need in the best case, according to a recent ITB-led

study that forecasts infections rising to 1.6 million in the country of 260 million people. As of Wednesday, 895 people in Indonesia had died of COVID-19, the government said, behind only China in east Asia. Indonesia has a mortality rate of 7.2 percent from the disease.

A key feature of the Vent-I, Hidayat said as he displayed the machine in his lab 150 km (90 miles) southeast of the capital Jakarta, is Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP), which is vital for a steady supply of air to the lungs of people with COVID-19. CPAP machines, commonly used to treat sleep apnoea, have been used in China and Italy to help coronavirus patients breathe without the need for a more invasive ventilator. Innovations like the Vent-I may have long-term benefits for hospitals in low-income countries, but it may not greatly help COVID-19 patients, whose care depends more on manpower and technique than equipment, said Eyal Leshem, director of the Center for Travel Medicine and Tropical Diseases at Sheba Medical Center in Israel.

"Simply having thousands of mechanical ventilation machines will only mean that we'll be able to connect the patients that are in respiratory failure and then watch them deteriorate within a few days," said Leshem, whose hospital has also done projects similar to Indonesia's \$1,000 device.

"For COVID, this is a cheap solution that may not have a substantial impact, unfortunately," Hidayat and his team plan to work with state-owned aircraft manufacturer Dirgantara Indonesia to make up to 500 ventilators a week. They are awaiting final clinical tests before getting a license to start mass production. "The first batch of production, around 600 to 700 units, are not for sale," Hidayat said. "Those will be donated." —Reuters

International

Gas leak at Indian chemical plant kills at least 6, 1,000 hospitalized

Residents complain of breathing problems, rashes on body and sore eyes

VISAKHAPATNAM: At least six people were killed and 1,000 hospitalized after a pre-dawn gas leak at a chemical plant in eastern India yesterday that left unconscious victims lying in the streets, authorities said. The gas escaped out of tanks at a complex owned by South Korea's LG Chem that had suspended operations because of India's coronavirus lockdown.

Footage on Indian television channels showed people, including women and children, lying motionless in the streets of Visakhapatnam, an industrial port city in Andhra Pradesh state. Local police commissioner RK Meena said six people had been confirmed killed, however the full scale of the disaster was unclear late yesterday morning. At least 1,000 people had been sent to different hospitals, according to B K Naik, district hospitals coordinator, who said many others were feared to be unconscious in their homes.

"There are people who were sleeping," Naik told AFP. "We are working to get people to the hospital. They need oxygenation and fresh air." Pictures taken by AFP at the King George Hospital in the city showed two or three patients on each bed, many of them children, and many unconscious. Some of the patients were lying on the beds in the sparse hospital wearing just shorts and without tops or shoes. Other photos showed vapor still rising from the tanks.

Prayers

"I pray for everyone's safety and well-being in Visakhapatnam," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Twitter. The plant, operated by LG Polymers, is a subsidiary of LG Chem, is on the

outskirts of Visakhapatnam. The city and the surrounding area are home to around five million people. LG Chem released a statement in South Korea late yesterday morning indicating gas had stopped leaking from the plant. "The gas leak situation is now under control and we are exploring all ways to provide speedy treatment for those who suffer from inhaling the leaked gas," the statement said. The plant had been left idle because of the coronavirus lockdown, according to Swaroop Rani, an assistant police commissioner, in Visakhapatnam, "(The gas) was left there because of the lockdown. It led to a chemical reaction and heat was produced inside the tanks, and the gas leaked because of that," Rani told AFP.

She said local villagers raised the alarm about 3:30am, saying there was gas in the air, and police officers who rushed to the scene had to quickly retreat for fear of being poisoned.

"One could feel the gas in the air and it was not possible for any of us to stay there for more than a few minutes," she said. LG Chem confirmed the plant was not operating because of the lockdown, but said there were maintenance staff at the facility. "While it's true that the factory wasn't operating as it was under lockdown, there were maintenance workers inside," a company spokesman told AFP in Seoul. "A worker on night shift discovered the leak and reported it."

Rashes, sore eyes

According to the Times of India there were at least eight dead, including an eight-year-old girl, and 5,000 people had fallen sick. Residents were complaining of breathing problems, rashes



VISAKHAPATNAM: Rescuers evacuate people following a gas leak incident at an LG Polymers plant in Visakhapatnam yesterday. — AFP

on their body and sore eyes, it added. The News18 television channel showed people slumped on the pavements with several apparently unconscious. The incident had echoes of one of the worst industrial disasters in history when gas leaked from a pesticide plant in the central Indian city of Bhopal in 1984.

Around 3,500 people, mainly in shanties around the plant operated by Union Carbide, died in the days that followed and thousands more in

the following years. People continue to suffer its after-effects to this day. Government statistics say that at least 100,000 people living near to the Union Carbide plant have been victims of chronic illnesses. Survivors still suffer from ailments such as respiratory and kidney problems, hormonal imbalances, mental illness and several forms of cancer. New generations have been made ill by the polluted groundwater and poisonous breast milk fed to them from birth. — AFP

Afghan forces bust 'IS-Haqqani' cell

KABUL: Afghanistan's intelligence agency said Wednesday it had busted a joint Islamic State-Haqqani network cell it accused of carrying out several attacks, including a deadly raid on a Sikh temple in Kabul. The National Directorate of Security (NDS) said in a statement that five militants were killed and eight others arrested when security forces stormed two hideouts of the group—one in Kabul and the other outside the capital. "This joint cell of Daesh and Haqqani network had carried out major attacks in the capital, including an attack on a Sikh temple in March," the NDS said, using the Arabic acronym for IS. At least 25 people were killed when gunmen stormed the temple in Kabul where worshippers were offering morning prayers.

The attack was claimed by the Islamic State in the Khorasan (IS-K), the Afghan

branch of IS. The IS-Haqqani cell was also behind a rocket attack that targeted the swearing-in ceremony of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the intelligence agency said.

The members of the cell had also killed several Afghan officials and fired rockets at Bagram, the US military's largest base in Afghanistan, the NDS said. Afghan officials have long accused the Haqqani network, a US-designated terror group with ties to the Taliban, of carrying out major attacks claimed by or blamed on IS-K. "There is undeniable evidence showing a strong link and cooperation between the Haqqani network and IS," a senior security official said on condition of anonymity. "They jointly plan and carry out terrorist attacks, especially in Kabul." Late last year, Afghan officials said IS-K had been completely defeated in Nangarhar, a key eastern province where it had first sought to establish a stronghold in 2015. A senior security analyst said Afghanistan's intelligence agents have long believed that the Haqqanis were either aiding IS-K in carrying out attacks or actually carrying out attacks in their name. — AFP

Indian ministry website crashes in repatriation 'panic'

NEW DELHI: The Indian civil aviation ministry's website crashed on Wednesday as panicked citizens abroad rushed to register for a repatriation of almost 15,000 nationals from 12 countries on planes and naval ships. India banned all incoming international flights in late March as it imposed one of the world's strictest virus lockdowns, leaving hundreds of thousands of workers and students stranded abroad.

Under the first phase of the mass effort announced on Tuesday, two ships were heading towards the Maldives to evacuate some 1,000 Indian citizens while another was headed for the Gulf. The first of 64 flights over the first week was due to leave the United Arab Emirates-home to more than three million Indians-yesterday. A flight from Qatar for the southern state of Kerala originally scheduled for yesterday was post-

poned to Saturday, local media reported. No reason was given. In total 26 flights will bring Indians home from the Gulf region, while others will operate from Southeast Asia, Britain and the United States. Indian media quoted civil aviation minister Hardeep Puri as saying that 200,000 Indians abroad had registered for repatriation and that the final number could be twice that.

His ministry blamed the crashing of its website on "unprecedented traffic" and urged people to check the website of Air India, which is operating the flights, for details.

Kerala is the biggest source of Indians in the Gulf. OV Mustafa, the director of Norka Roots, a government welfare body for non-resident Keralites, told AFP that those abroad were "desperate" and in a "panic". The Indian embassy in Abu Dhabi said on Twitter that all passengers would be screened for virus symptoms and given an antibody test at the departure airport.

There were also concerns about social distancing on the flights, with the Times of India quoting Puri as saying that keeping middle seats vacant on the aircraft was not viable. The Indian embassy statement said that passengers would be given masks, gloves and sanitisers to wear and use on board. — AFP

International

Cruise ship linked to Australian virus cluster reaches Philippines

Manila to evacuate more than 200 crew amid outcry

MANILA: A cruise ship at the heart of Australia's biggest coronavirus cluster arrived off the Philippines yesterday to repatriate more than 200 crew, leaving behind weeks of outrage and acrimony over why symptomatic passengers were allowed to disembark. Just under a quarter of Australia's 97 coronavirus deaths can be traced back to Carnival Corp's Ruby Princess, which has been a flashpoint for anger in Australia and the focus of a criminal investigation after a spike in cases followed its March 19 arrival in Sydney.

The 114,000-tonne, 19-deck ship reached Manila Bay yesterday, joining a cluster of about a dozen other cruise ships that will be subjected to on-board testing for COVID-19 before any Filipino crew members can disembark. Reduced flights and travel bans due to the coronavirus, as well as outbreaks on several ships, have brought the cruise industry to a virtual standstill.

Princess Cruises said on Wednesday its voyages would remain suspended through to the end of summer. According to the coastguard, there are 214 Filipinos aboard the Ruby Princess, one of at least three ships owned by Carnival's cruise company that became hotbeds of coronavirus infections.

A special commission of inquiry in Australia has

been hearing testimony this week about events leading up to the unloading of about 2,700 passengers without health checks. Included at the hearing were details of medical logs a few days earlier that showed dozens of people aboard were showing acute respiratory symptoms, with numbers rising each day.

Nearly 700 guests who disembarked later tested positive for the coronavirus, some spreading it across Australia, including to far-flung places like Tasmania, where all but two of 12 deaths stem from the cruise ship. Carnival has said it would cooperate with the investigation by the New South Wales state homicide squad.

At the weekend, Admiral Joey Garcia, commandant of the Philippine coastguard, said he hoped testing of the cruise ships in Manila Bay could be completed within a week and quarantine "graduates" could return home soon. On Wednesday, 1,912 Filipino crew members aboard seven ships were visited by task force personnel carrying out the tests. "The ship itself is the quarantine place for the seafarers," Garcia said. "The quarantine rule is to have all of them tested before they disembark." More than 500 crew of 15 nationalities were repatriated from the Ruby Princess last month. — Reuters



MANILA: A fishing boat sails past the Princess Cruises' Ruby Princess cruise ship as it docks in Manila Bay during the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Cavite city, Philippines, yesterday. — Reuters

Australia fears suicide spike due to shutdown

SYDNEY: Thousands of Australians are expected to take their own lives because of the financial and psychological stress of the coronavirus crisis, far outstripping the death toll from the disease itself, experts warned yesterday. Modelling by the Brain and Mind Centre at Sydney University predicted an additional 750 to 1,500 suicides per year for up to five years as a result of the impacts of the pandemic and economic shutdowns imposed to curb its spread.

That would mark a spike of 25 to 50 percent over the 3,000 suicides usually recorded each year in the country. Youth, hit hard by the closure of schools and hospitality businesses, were expected to make up about 30 percent of the additional suicides, the center said in a joint report with the Australian Medical Association and mental health experts. "We know that young people are going to be disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures that are needed to stop the spread of this deadly disease," they said.

"These people are vulnerable to experiencing psychological, financial, and housing stress in the short and longer terms," they said. Australia has been one of the most successful countries in containing COVID-19, with fewer than 7,000 confirmed cases and 100 deaths out of a population of 25 million. — AFP

Forced exorcisms touted as 'cure' for LGBT Indonesians

JAKARTA: Andin is haunted by memories of being forced into an exorcism to "save" her from being transgender—a ritual that could become mandatory for Indonesia's LGBT community if a controversial new law is passed. For two decades she has endured harassment and abuse as her family desperately tried to "cure" her. Treatments ranged from being bombarded with Koranic verses while trapped in a locked room for days, to being doused with freezing water by an imam promising to purge the "gender disease". But it is the exorcism that breaks her heart.

She was taken against her will to a strange religious guru near her hometown of Medan in Sumatra. He showed her a burial shroud commonly used to cover the dead and prayed over her.

He then gave a stark choice: relinquish life as a woman, or go to hell. "Nothing changed after the exorcism. I'm still LGBT, but my family didn't give up easily," says Andin, 31, who asked that her real name not be used. "It's traumatizing—the horror of that memory stays in my head."

Forced exorcism is a common story for gay and transgender people in the world's biggest Muslim majority nation, where a conservative shift has seen the community increasingly targeted in recent years. Homosexuality is legal everywhere in Indonesia except conservative Aceh province which adheres to strict Islamic laws.

But it is still widely believed that being gay or transgender is the result of a person being possessed by evil spirits—and that these can be expelled by religious ceremony and prayer.

Now, conservative Islamic lawmakers have tabled a so-called "Family Resilience" bill, which critics decry as sexist and anti-

LGBT. Gay and transgender people would be forced to undergo "rehabilitation"—an umbrella term likely to include exorcisms and other "conversion treatments"—to purge what bill advocates say is a sexual deviancy.

'Expel evil spirits'

Although now a Muslim-majority nation, traditional tribal animist and shamanist beliefs have been incorporated into the cultural and religious identity across the Southeast Asian archipelago, which is home to more than 260 million. Exorcisms have long been used for everything from tackling mental illness to clearing villages of alleged apparitions.

This means the practice will play key role if the new law is passed, warns Usman Hamid, Amnesty International Indonesia's executive director. "(It's) the most likely option to be taken by officials in Indonesia when doing 'rehabilitation'", he adds. For Aris Fatoni, who performs exorcisms to rid patients of myriad medical and personal problems, mandatory conversion therapy will bring a business boom. He claims he has "cured" around 10 such clients in the past decade.

During an exorcism, Fatoni reads from the Koran as he places his hands on clients and then watches for signs he believes suggest evil spirits are being expelled.

"It's usually a strong reaction but that means they'll be cured quicker," he explains, adding that he's witnessed vomiting and screaming in the process. "However, if someone likes being LGBT and they've only come here out of curiosity then there's no reaction. Those cases are harder to fix."

His colleague, Ahmad Sadzali, also boasts of successful conversions. "One guy I treated only did the exorcism twice and he is cured now. He married a woman just one month later," he recalls.

Six clinics in Jakarta told AFP they performed exorcisms that would "cure" LGBT clients, although none openly advertised the treatment. "How long have you been suffering the disease?" one shop owner asks over the telephone, before reminding the caller he cannot treat those with HIV. — AFP

Lifestyle

Friday|Times

FRIDAY, MAY 8, 2020

www.kuwaittimes.net

Coronavirus-shaped pinatas are displayed for sale at a store in Guatemala City amid the COVID-19 pandemic.—AFP

Amsterdam eatery trials greenhouses for socially-distant dining

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Lifestyle | Feature

Explorer learns to love lockdown in Swiss chalet



South African-born Swiss explorer and adventurer Mike Horn poses for a photograph as he stays at home in his chalet in Chateau-d'Oex.—AFP photos



Mike Horn cuts some wood with a hatchet.

After venturing through the Amazon, the Himalayas and reaching both Poles, explorer Mike Horn is now, thanks to the coronavirus crisis, discovering new, uncharted territory: home. Positive thinking in the most extreme circumstances has seen him through many an expedition, so the South African adventurer is applying the same principles to lockdown. He is sticking to the advice to stay home and wants to make this period a “rewarding experience”, he told AFP at his chalet in Chateau d’Oex, in the mountains of Vaud in western Switzerland.

He has even continued training in the woods around his home — pulling three car tyres behind him on a rope to simulate the 180-kilogram (28-stone) sled he uses on Polar ice caps. Horn settled in the rolling Alpine pastures somewhat by accident in the 1990s after leaving South Africa in search of adventure. The 53-year-old has spent little time in his Swiss base due to his regular expeditions. However, Switzerland imposed restrictions in mid-March in a bid to halt the spread of the pandemic — meaning Horn had to deal with his world shrinking down to a chalet. He saw it as an opportunity to enjoy a “slightly different form of freedom... the freedom to think, to be creative, and to really bond with the family”. The adventurer, whose wife Cathy died in 2015, is spending more time with their two daughters Annika and Jessica. He said the cosy certainties of lockdown were “a privilege to experience, immediately after an expedition where my life was not guaranteed every day”.

Facing fear

Imposed confinement is something “you



Mike Horn poses for a photograph, with his daughter.

cannot change”, the former special forces soldier said, adding: “I am someone who invests energy into things I can change.” On his last expedition, Horn listed in his journal all the things he wanted to do once he got home. Lockdown has allowed him to tackle those tasks with gusto. He has set about chopping up wood for next winter, throwing out old equipment and skis, and writing the tale of his first major expedition: riverboarding the entire length of the Amazon in 1997. In 2001, Horn completed an 18-month solo journey around the Equator without any motorised transport.

Then in 2004 he completed a two-year circumnavigation of the Arctic Circle. In 2006, he and Norwegian explorer Borge Ousland completed the first unsupported winter trek ever attempted to the North



Mike Horn walks on a slack-line.

Pole. While he accepts the need for lockdown in big cities where the risk of infection is higher, he is less keen on how it is being applied across the board. “People who are in good health, who know that risk exists in life but are respectful towards others and keep their distance — why lock them indoors?” he said. Horn would also like to see public fear about the virus wane over time. “Fear and worry is more dangerous than COVID-19,” he said. “Fear is something that you have to learn how to manage. For me, it’s part of my job.”

Pause for thought

Horn has spent some of the lockdown reflecting on the environment. “It is rather encouraging to have the proof now that if man changes or reduces his activities a little, we

can take care of this planet which feeds us,” he said. “I was on the ice four months ago and where it was 2.5 metres thick at the North Pole in 2006, in December it was five centimetres.” It is with these thoughts in mind that he is charting out his next steps once the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. Horn is thinking about taking people with him on expeditions to carry out environmental projects.

“I said to myself, ‘Mike, at your age, you also need to start changing your life. You have to do something different,’” he said. “I can be more active in teaching young people about the state of our planet, how we can change the way we live so that our planet can benefit and exist for much longer. “That’s what motivates me today.”—AFP



Sarah Wilkinson, Zach Wilkinson, Destiny Wilkinson, and Robert Wilkinson wait for a movie to begin at the Family Drive-In Theatre during its opening night amid novel coronavirus restrictions.—AFP

Drive-in cinema summer tour set in US

The team behind the Tribeca Film Festival is organizing a summer film series across the United States at drive-in theaters, which are experiencing a renaissance thanks to the coronavirus pandemic. Organizers are partnering with telecoms giant AT&T and big-screen company IMAX for the event, which will kick off on June 25. Screenings of new, classic and indie films — as well as special music and sports events — will take place at drive-ins and other locations to be announced later on, along with the schedule. “We’re excited to give people something to look forward to this summer and reinvent a classic moviegoing experience for communities to enjoy together safely,” said Tribeca festival co-founder Robert De Niro.

After putting on a digital version of its

own festival, the Tribeca team announced it would work with the world’s other top festivals — Cannes, Venice, Toronto — to stage a 10-day YouTube event from May 29. Drive-in theaters, where filmgoers watch movies on a giant outdoor screen from their cars, are an indelible part of American pop culture. The first opened in 1933 in New Jersey. At the height of their popularity after World War II, there were several thousand drive-ins across the country.

But the soaring cost of real estate in urban areas and the sheer number of movie theaters, along with the rising popularity of home video systems, led drive-ins to the scrapheap. There are only 305 drive-in theaters left in the United States, according to the United Drive-In Theatre Owners Association.

Several of them have remained open as strict stay-at-home measures were put in place to help curb the spread of the coronavirus — and with other theaters shut, business has been good. The Raleigh Road Outdoor Theatre in North Carolina reopened early this month, after being shut for a month.

Open seven days a week, it’s only operating at half-capacity to ensure proper social distancing between cars. So far, the theater is sold out on weekends. “Nobody seems to be afraid to come out,” said owner Mike Frank, who said he’s been approached to host other events, such as concerts and high school graduations. Since late March, two churches have been organizing drive-in services at his site “We’re looking at a laser show,” he said.—AFP

‘Smuggled’ poems by jailed Chinese-Swedish bookseller published

A Swedish publisher has released a collection of poetry written by Chinese-Swedish bookseller Gui Minhai and “smuggled” out of China where he is currently incarcerated. The 11 poems, written in Chinese and translated to Swedish, focus on the author’s vision of Sweden, covering Norse myths, Swedish people and traditions as well as his reflections on life in prison. “Some of the poems have been published in both Swedish and international newspapers a year ago or so. But this is the first time the complete collection of prison poems is made available,” Martin Kaunitz of Stockholm-based publisher Kaunitz-Olsson told AFP on Wednesday.

Entitled “I draw a door on the wall with my finger,” the collection was published on Gui’s 56th birthday, May 5, and is prefaced by his daughter Angela Gui, who has actively campaigned for her father’s release. Kaunitz said Gui Minhai “memorised” the poems while in prison and “when he was released for a short while, he wrote them down and smuggled them out to his daughter”. Gui, one of five Hong

Kong-based booksellers known for publishing salacious titles about China’s political leaders, has been at the centre of diplomatic tensions between Stockholm and Beijing. Gui Minhai disappeared from a vacation home in Thailand in 2015. Several months later, he appeared on Chinese state television confessing to a fatal drunk driving accident from more than a decade earlier.

Chinese authorities said they released him in October 2017, but according to his daughter, he was then placed under house arrest in the eastern Chinese city of Ningbo. He was again arrested in early 2018 on a train in China, accompanied by Swedish diplomats. In February of this year a Ningbo court convicted him of illegally providing intelligence abroad and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. Gui became a Swedish citizen in 1992 after moving to the Nordic country in 1988, but the Chinese court claimed he had also voluntarily reinstated his Chinese citizenship in 2018. China does not recognise dual citizenship, but Sweden has maintained that Gui remains a Swedish citizen, and demanded access to him in prison.

High and dry: Icelanders inconsolable without their pools

Birdsong now fills the air around Iceland’s outdoor swimming pools, closed for weeks because of the new coronavirus to the dismay of locals, for whom the popular spots lie at the very heart of Icelandic life. The British have their pubs, the French have their cafes, and the Finns have their saunas. Here, Icelanders flock to the pool to swim laps or just hang out in the hot tubs. Even on the coldest winter days, Icelanders love to take a dip in one of the many outdoor pools. The country’s 134 municipal swimming pools and other hot pools are as much a place to socialize as to exercise. “It’s a cultural thing. We come together in the pools to meet other people, to talk to each other and just relax after a hard day at work or after a good workout,” Hulda Bjarkar, who normally teaches swimming lessons at Iceland’s biggest pool Laugardalslaug, tells AFP. This sprawling complex in the centre of Reykjavik has been closed since March 24 as part of the restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. The water still ripples in the main pools but the complex’s four hot tubs — where temperatures range from 40 to 44 degrees Celsius (104 to 111 degrees Fahrenheit) — have been emptied, and the chirping of birds has replaced the usual chatter. The place usually welcomes 1,800 daily visitors.

‘It’s our way of life’

“You would (normally) see the elderly people in the morning doing their exercises in large groups, so for them it is a big adjustment to not be able to see their friends here everyday,” says Bjarkar. One of those is 80-year-old Robert Spano, who moved here from Italy a half-century ago after falling in love with an Icelandic woman. “It is very, very difficult that the swimming pool is closed because it is our way of life,” says the retired businessman, who lives by the proverb “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” “I enjoy being outside in the pool, I enjoy it when it’s snowing, raining, cold, I don’t really care... It’s very healthy for me.”

He goes for a swim everyday with his wife, meeting up with friends and chatting for up to an hour in one of the outdoor hot tubs. Those enjoyable talks — about politics, sports or the weather — have not been able to take place elsewhere instead due to social distancing rules. For others, it’s not the socializing they long for, it’s the swimming. “That’s one thing I really miss: the contact with the water. It’s a coping mechanism for me since it helps me to clear my mind,” says 23-year-old Kristinn Thorarinnsson, one of Iceland’s most promising swimmers who normally practices twice a day.

‘For survival’

Public swimming pools are relatively new to the North Atlantic volcanic island, known for its abundance of hot springs. With the rise of coal and heating oil prices in the early 20th century, Iceland began transitioning to alternative energy sources, harnessing geothermal power. This energy was also used to heat swimming pools, which made their debut on the subarctic island soon after. —AFP



This picture shows a view of the 50m outdoor pool at the biggest swimming pool of Iceland, Laugardalslaug, closed due to the novel Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic in Reykjavik, Iceland.—AFP



A man walks past a coronavirus-related mural, in Acapulco, Guerrero state, Mexico, on May 1, 2020. —AFP

Gaming becomes king of entertainment in pandemic lockdown

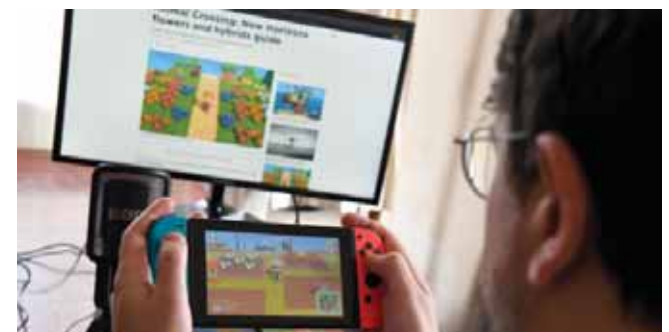
You are facing a pandemic lockdown with no seeming escape. But wait! You still have your marksman rifle for “Call of Duty” and the mysterious island on “Animal Crossing: New Horizons” awaits exploration. Video games have been seeing exceptional growth during the COVID-19 pandemic which has shut down real-world activity and kept billions indoors. Evidence of the gaming surge was seen in strong results this week from Activision Blizzard, which said an average of 102 million people played its games such as “Call of Duty” online monthly the first quarter of this year.

The company reported growth in titles such as “Overwatch,” “World of Warcraft” and the popular color-matching smartphone game “Candy Crush. Electronic Arts, meanwhile, saw players flock to online sports in hit franchises devoted to soccer, baseball, and American football. “They’re gaming so much they are wearing out their devices,” said analyst Ted Pollak of Jon Peddie Research. A report by Futuresource Consulting called gaming “the shooting star of the entertainment industry” which is expected to grow its share of the sector to 36 percent by 2023 from 31 percent last year. “Following a record-breaking year in 2019, with gaming software generating \$143 billion of consumer spend, the industry is now poised for further growth, with captive audiences worldwide acting as a catalyst.”

NPD analyst Matt Piscatella said sales of the Nintendo Switch gaming console doubled in March compared with a year earlier, with many of those users playing games like “Animal Crossing: New Horizons,” the fifth of the franchise which takes people to explore a deserted island. “Existing gamers have more time to spend because of the lockdown, and schoolchildren are at home,” said Futuresource analyst Morris Garrard. “We were expecting the console segment to see a dampened year as a result of people putting purchases of software and hardware ahead of (new) console releases. But with people stuck at home, you have a massive base of existing content that people are engaging with.” The research firm has boosted its forecast for mobile gaming, now expected to grow 12 percent worldwide, helped in part by the deployment of fast fifth-generation or 5G wireless networks in some parts of the world.

Games for all ages

The lockdown gaming craze appears to be luring people of all ages. Young children are turning to titles such as Roblox, which allows for creative, user-generated experiences. The older crowd is using online versions of the Chinese tile game Mah-Jong, part of what marketers call the “gray gamer” phenomenon. “With movement restrictions, time-rich retirees are isolated and turning to mobile games,” said Garrard. “It’s a substitute for meeting up with friends and playing games face-to-face.” Garrard said that in China notably, there has been a pronounced boost in online Mah-Jong play. —AFP



This photo shows Australian high school teacher Dante Gabriele playing Nintendo’s Animal Crossing at home in Melbourne during the country’s enforced COVID-19 coronavirus lockdown. —AFP

Game world star PewDiePie signs exclusive deal with YouTube

YouTube on Monday announced that streaming star PewDiePie will make the Google-owned video platform his exclusive online stage. PewDiePie, whose real name is Felix Kjellberg, has 104 million subscribers at YouTube, where his videos have racked up more than 25 billion views. No details were disclosed regarding any financial incentives involved in his decision to go exclusive at Google-owned YouTube, which competes with rival platforms such as Amazon-owned Twitch and Microsoft Mixer.

“YouTube has been my home for over a decade now and live streaming on the platform feels like a natural fit as I continue to look for new ways to create content and interact with fans worldwide,” Kjellberg said in a release. Kjellberg created a YouTube channel in 2010 and began uploading videos of “Minecraft” and “Amnesia” game play, according to the service. His channel has evolved to include a range of comedy and reaction videos as well as popular videos about topics catching fire on various online platforms. In August 2013, Kjellberg became the most-subscribed YouTube channel in the world in 2013, and six years later became the first individual YouTube creator to reach 100 million subscribers.

Kjellberg is going exclusive at YouTube as online gaming and video streaming has surged overall as people staying home due to the deadly pandemic turn to the internet for entertainment. “YouTube is where the world comes together to connect and during these unprecedented times,” said head of gaming Ryan Wyatt. “I couldn’t be more thrilled to continue to grow our roster of creators who are making our platform their exclusive live streaming home.” The list of gaming-related content stars exclusive at YouTube include CouRage, Lachlan, LazarBeam, Muselk, Typical Gamer, and Valkyrae. YouTube touts being the largest global gaming platform with more than



Felix Kjellberg

200 million gamers a day watching more than 50 billion hours of game play annually.

The 30-year-old Swede has stepped into controversy over the years. In September 2017, he apologized for using a racial slur in an expletive-laden rant against an opponent during a live-streamed computer game. Before that, he was shunned by YouTube and Disney over videos containing anti-Semitic insults or Nazi references. In 2016, he was temporarily blocked from Twitter after joking he had joined the Islamic State group. Kjellberg last year said he was “sickened” after hearing that the gunman behind a New Zealand mosque massacre had promoted his videos before opening fire. —AFP



People have dinner in a so-called quarantine greenhouses in Amsterdam.



Amsterdam eatery trials greenhouses for socially-distant dining

An Amsterdam art centre is to serve diners in small greenhouses so that people can go out to eat again despite social distancing rules brought in due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Mediamatic centre is currently testing out the new way of eating as it waits for Dutch authorities to reopen restaurants that have been shut since March 16 because of the COVID-19 outbreak. "Corona now forces us to rethink how we can do hospitality," the centre's director Willem Velthoven told AFP. "We used to have already these little greenhouses here for art projects. We thought 'ok let's try what happens if we sit in these small places, does it feel good and can we serve in a safe way' and it goes quite well actually."

Sitting next to a canal, the five small glass houses each have a little round table and two chairs — perfect for people who may want to go out once eating establishments reopen but don't feel comfortable going back immediately to crowded restaurants. "Being together in large groups will probably be out of fashion for a while but still coming in a social situation and really enjoying things together is something that we long for even more," said Velthoven. Waiters hand in the food from outside the greenhouse and wear protective gear in front of their faces to guard against any "accidental exchanges" with customers, he added. "The greenhouses are so small that actually the serving staff wouldn't even fit inside."—AFP



Groups of friends have dinner in a so-called quarantine greenhouse in Amsterdam.

Creative cooks: Asian street food chefs fight lockdown slowdown

From Facebook groups to hyper-local delivery services, Southeast Asia's street food chefs are cooking up creative ways to sell their wares as they struggle to survive during the coronavirus pandemic. The region is known for exotic treats often enjoyed at chairs and tables by the roadside, from mango sticky rice to rich coconut curries. But restrictions imposed to fight the virus have forced vendors off the streets and confined customers to their homes — leaving businesses scrambling to find new ways to make ends meet.

And even with lockdowns being eased in some places, business will likely be slow to recover as many people continue to observe social-distancing. One chef in Singapore, where open-air food courts housing many stalls are largely deserted as eating out has been banned, has created a Facebook group and is helping less tech-savvy vendors advertise takeaways. Melvin Chew, 42, whose stall offers rice noodles and braised duck, said the group now has over 250,000 members, including both food sellers — known locally as "hawkers" — and customers. "There are a lot of supporters who have been helping out sharing (the

Facebook page)... this actually brings out the passion and the love for Singapore hawkers' food," he said. In the Thai capital Bangkok, one small hostel has transformed itself into a centre to help street food sellers in their historic neighborhood.

Once Again Hostel has launched a delivery service linking vendors up with customers in the area via messaging app LINE, and takes a 15 percent commission — far lower than other such online services. After a customer places an order, the food is dropped off at the hostel, and staff then arrange for motorbike couriers to deliver it. Thai street food classics like pad thai and roast pork noodles are among the most popular dishes. In some places, the community is rallying around — a crowd-funding campaign has been launched in Myanmar's biggest city Yangon to raise money for street food sellers. Despite curbs to fight the spread of the virus, some desperate vendors continue to sell food where and when they can, risking harassment from authorities and police. "We want to make sure street vendors have the choice to stay home," said Emilie Roell from Doh Eain, the group behind the campaign.—AFP



This photo shows Eileen Chew handing takeaway food for a customer at her small food stall, as the business has moved to delivery. —AFP photos

Lifestyle | Music & Movies



In this file photo US actor Robert De Niro arrives for the 92nd Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California.—AFP photos



Singer Madonna

Mission Impossible to Mission Control: Tom Cruise to film in space

Tom Cruise will film his next Hollywood blockbuster on location — 250 miles up in the air and orbiting the Earth once every 90 minutes. The “Top Gun” star will fly through the stratosphere to shoot an as-yet-unknown film aboard the International Space Station (ISS), NASA said on Tuesday. The American space agency’s director Jim Bridenstine confirmed the news on Twitter, saying he was excited that the move would “inspire a new generation of engineers and scientists” to work on space travel. Cruise, 56, famously still does his own cliff-hanging, car-rolling stunts.

He gained his commercial piloting license after his role in Top Gun as Pete “Maverick” Mitchell, a hotshot US Navy pilot who has a dangerous and reckless flying style, and reportedly flew some aircraft in the long-awaited sequel to the 1986 classic due later this year. But if his latest daring project goes ahead, Cruise will be the first Hollywood A-lister to appear onscreen from outside the planet’s atmosphere. —AFP



Tom Cruise

Stars and scientists call for world not to ‘go back to normal’

A host of celebrities and scientists including Madonna, Robert de Niro and a clutch of Nobel Prize winners have called for radical change in the world rather than “a return to normal” after the coronavirus lockdowns. Hollywood stars Cate Blanchett, Jane Fonda, Marion Cotillard and Monica Bellucci also added their names to the open letter published in the French daily Le Monde pleading for an end to unbridled consumerism and a “radical transformation” of economies to help save the planet. “We believe it is unthinkable to ‘go back to normal,’” said the letter which was also signed by Nobel laureates for medicine, chemistry and physics as well as peace prize winner Muhammad Yunus.

They said the pandemic was a tragedy but it was a chance for humanity to “examine what is essential”. “Adjustments are not enough. The problem is systemic,” the letter added. “The ongoing

ecological catastrophe is a meta-crisis. Unlike a pandemic... a global ecological collapse will have immeasurable consequences,” it said. The 200 signatories said it was time for leaders “to leave behind the unsustainable logic that still prevails and to undertake a profound overhaul of our goals, values, and economies. “The pursuit of consumerism and an obsession with productivity have led us to deny the value of life itself: that of plants, that of animals, and that of a great number of human beings,” the short letter added. “Pollution, climate change, and the destruction of our remaining natural zones has brought the world to a breaking point.”—AFP

Welcome baby X Æ A-12: Musk and Grimes do it their way

Fans hoping for clarity and perhaps some pronunciation tips were left floundering Wednesday after Elon Musk’s girlfriend, the musician Grimes, explained their newborn son’s name — X Æ A-12. Musk, the outspoken Tesla chief, announced the birth of the couple’s first child earlier this week, before Grimes broke down the unusual moniker. “X, the unknown variable. Æ, my elven spelling of Ai (love &/or Artificial intelligence). A-12 = precursor to SR-17 (our favorite aircraft),” she wrote on Twitter. “A” also stands for “Archangel, my favorite song,” she added. Musk, the 48-year-old CEO of SpaceX, gently corrected Grimes on

Twitter to say the plane was an SR-71 — a Cold War spy aircraft.

“I am recovering from surgery and barely alive so may my typos b forgiven,” she joked in reply. Registering the name in their home state of California may create some legal challenges as non-alphabetic characters are not allowed by law. Musk, who has been dating Grimes since 2018, already had five sons, and has been divorced three times — twice from the same woman. Grimes, 32, whose real name is Claire Boucher, announced she was pregnant in January. The couple made waves with their first public appearance together at the Met Gala in 2018, surprising both the music and business worlds. Grimes wore a choker shaped like the Tesla logo, demonstrating their relationship status. Musk, known for his vaulting ambition and brash demeanor, made news last week in a Twitter message saying Tesla’s stock was overvalued, sending shares of the electric carmaker tumbling.—AFP



In this file photo Elon Musk and Grimes arrive for the 2018 Met Gala, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.—AFP

Florian Schneider, co-founder of Germany’s iconic Kraftwerk, dead at 73

Kraftwerk’s Florian Schneider, co-founder of the pioneering electronic music group that re-wired the future of pop, has died, the group’s management said Wednesday. He was 73 years old. Schneider died following a short battle with cancer, according to a statement citing his fellow co-founder Ralf Huetter, obtained by AFP from Kraftwerk’s publicist in Los Angeles. Schneider and Huetter began their artistic collaboration in 1968 as part of the so-called “krautrock” movement — a broad experimental genre blending psychedelic rock with electronic rhythms and early synthesizers, seen as a rebellion against the Anglo-Saxon pop brought in by British and American troops.

But Kraftwerk, launched in 1970, hatched a far more singular vision from their “Kling Klang” studio in the western German city of Duesseldorf. Their influence on par with The Beatles, the duo crafted the blueprint for genres from new wave to synth-pop, hip hop to rock, industrial to techno. The nearly 23-minute title track of their 1974 album “Autobahn” — the German word for highway — comprised the entire first side of the LP with a prototypical, hypnotizing sound of the future, punctuated with car horns, doors slamming and ignition.

The industrial clang, sparse arrangements and computerized beats of Kraftwerk — which



In this file photo the piece “Roboter” of the German band Kraftwerk is performed during a concert at the Neue Nationalgalerie (New National Gallery) museum in Berlin.—AFP

means “power station” in German — brought international recognition to the group who famously said they wanted to make music more as machines than as men. Schneider’s tools included the electric flute, violin, electric guitar and synthesizer. He also sang with Huetter, who played keyboards. Their haunting basslines, synthesizer pads and drum machines combined with robotic vocals captured the attention of a dizzying array of stars past and present, including David Bowie, Madonna, Daft Punk and Kanye West.—AFP



Le Bernardin chef and co-owner Eric Ripert poses for pictures while he prepares meals for health care workers as part of the World Central Kitchen charity at his flagship New York restaurant in New York City.



Eric Ripert prepares meals for health care workers.—AFP photos

Help workers, forget stars: Renowned chef Eric Ripert re-opens his kitchen

Before coronavirus struck New York, one of the world's premier seafood restaurants Le Bernardin was offering tasting menus including striped bass truffle tartare and grilled lobster mi-cuit. Today it serves up hundreds of plastic trays of roast chicken, rice and cabbage to feed the city's medical workers. Eric Ripert, a three-star chef originally from France, reopened one of his Manhattan kitchens on Wednesday for the first time since March 13 — where from Monday to Friday four of his 180 currently unemployed staff will prepare some 400 daily meals.

Balanced menus including pasta bolognese with broccoli, meatloaf, couscous or tajine are set for delivery to health workers sheltering in the central neighborhood's hotels, who descended on the embattled city en masse to reinforce hospitals overwhelmed with patients. "For now it's important to help out the overall community, specifically doctors and nurses," Ripert, donning a mask and gloves, told AFP. The goal, said the renowned chef, is to assist "people who take enormous risks, see horrible things during the day — when they return to their hotel, they can relax and eat something tasty."

Still luxe

Even if the pandemic has slowed its once relentless pace in New York, the city remains the nation's coronavirus epicenter, with more than 19,000 confirmed or probable deaths linked to

COVID-19. The 55-year-old Ripert's project to deliver meals is in collaboration with the Jose Andres-founded World Central Kitchen aid organization. Authorities have not yet projected a date to begin relaxing confinement measures. Ripert hopes he might be able to re-open Le Bernardin in September.

Though that dream date seems far off and isn't fixed, he can't help but consider the famous restaurant post-pandemic. He doesn't plan to offer elegant dishes to go, as some Michelin-starred chefs have done the world round — but "it definitely won't be the same Bernardin it was before the closure," he said in a slight accent hailing from France's south, still audible despite 31 years in the United States. Still, "Le Bernardin is a fancy restaurant with three Michelin stars — we will try to continue to be able to create this experience for our diners," he said.

Reduced capacity

There will have to be more space between the tables and less capacity, said Ripert: currently, without counting two reception lounges, the restaurant can host 120 people. Staff will need to work wearing masks and gloves while using plenty of disinfectant, Ripert emphasized. But the economic equation remains in question for the restaurant co-owner, who is used to seeing his establishment full for both lunch and dinner. Ripert, who since the pandemic began has posted simple, affordable recipes for his



Eric Ripert explains health measures before preparing meals for health care workers.

nearly 600,000 Instagram followers, declined to offer insight into his accounting. But he expects he will need to reduce his staff from 180 pre-crisis down to 40 or 50 employees. And international clientele, some 30 to 40 percent of his business, will likely drop off until foreign travel is once again in full swing.

Staff before stars

But will he keep his stars? "We will do everything we can to work for our diners to have a quality time at Le Bernardin, and keep our employees able to work," the chef said. "Then the stars will come — or not come. "Today it's not really what's important, when we think of the global crisis we are living," he added. Ripert doesn't doubt his adopted home's ability to bounce back. "We're not going to overnight — to be as full of energy as we were takes time," he said. "But New York will always be New York, and New York will return to the level it was," said Ripert, complete with the "creativity and energy" the city embodies.—AFP



Food is prepared along with Le Bernardin chef and co-owner Eric Ripert.



Food is prepared by Okan Kizilbayir, Sous Chef along with Le Bernardin chef and co-owner Eric Ripert for health care workers.



Brother and sister playing on the floor at home in Maplewood, New Jersey.

13 ACTIVITIES THAT WILL KEEP KIDS BUSY AT HOME, AND ON YOUR NEXT FAMILY TRIP

By Lonely Planet Writer, Regan Stephens

While we're spending more time at home, we're also finding new and creative ways to stay entertained. There are still plenty of ways to explore the world – and map out your next great adventure – from your living room (or kitchen!). Travel-inspired movies and board games can spark a little cheer, and travel toys, games and crafts that are usually meant for cheerfully distracting kids during a long journey can now be used to engage and educate at home.

Here are 13 parent-approved, mess-free activities to entertain the kids, whether it's during a transatlantic flight to a faraway country or for a few quiet hours at home.

Toddlers:

Temporary tattoos

Let your kids turn hands and arms into canvases with temporary tattoos like the ones from Brooklyn-born brand Tattly. Designed by artists and made with non-toxic vegetable-based inks, they're both adorable and safe, and they wear off in just a couple of days.

Reusable Stickers

Any stickers are handy for amusing kids, but the Melissa & Doug Habitats sticker pad

includes 150 reusable stickers and five backgrounds – a jungle, farm, or underwater scene, among others – for creating a masterpiece. And then recreating it over and over again. (The books come in a variety of themes, including vehicles and my town).

Reusable coloring books

Water Wow coloring books are a must-have for parents with small kids when traveling or just trying to enjoy a peaceful dinner in your neighborhood restaurant. Fill the accompanying plastic paintbrush with water, and let your tot "paint" each page of the book, revealing colorful scenes. (Parent hack: if you don't have easy access to a sink to fill the brush, use a straw to siphon a little from your water glass).

Post-it notes

It's usually the most low-tech activities that provide the most amusement. (See: the beloved giant cardboard box used to ship any expensive electronic toy). Parents of young toddlers swear by Post-it notes, which offer mess-free fun – sticking on tray tables, car seats, or anything else in arm's reach. Older toddlers can draw on the sticky squares, or arrange in colorful designs.

Sorting bears

The durable, portable Skoolzy kit is several games in one. With dozens of colorful



Tattly temporary tattoo



Chess set

bears, cups, a large die and tongs, kids can stack, sort, engage in imaginative play, and flex those fine motor skills. When playtime is over, it all fits neatly into a sturdy sack.

School age:

Play-Doh

Open-ended activities usually entertain for the longest stretches. Tiny, 1-ounce pots of Play-Doh are easy to throw in your bag before traveling, and are just as easy to pull out while you're cooking dinner. Dole out the little pots with instructions to create a favorite animal, a character, or whatever meal they're about to eat.

Writing tablet

A wireless tablet can provide a creative distraction for kids of any age. The Boogie Board Scribble and Play allows kids to write and draw in color, using one of four easy-grip stylus tools that attach to the board. After they add the finishing touches to their artwork, get a blank canvas with the press of a button. If they're sad that their masterpiece will disappear, snap a photo first.

Rush Hour game

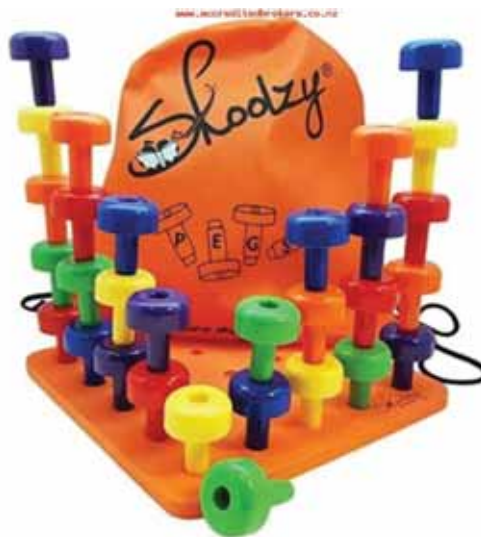
Even with some small parts, the Rush Hour Jr, traffic jam is a winner for to-go game time. Brightly-hued vehicles, a traffic grid board, and deck of cards fit inside a portable pouch, and the logic game doesn't require much space to set up. The cards include 40 different challenges to clear a path for the ice cream truck, and build problem-solving skills in the process.

Paint by sticker book

Use numbered stickers to create vibrant mosaic pictures with these paint by sticker books. Available in various themes, like zoo animals, beautiful bugs and unicorns & magic, they help kids practice numbers and fine motor skills while crafting colorful works of art.

Spot It game

Engage in a little friendly family competition. A fast card game that comes in a portable, packable tin, Spot It is fun for both kids and adults. A round of takes about 15 minutes, and can be played anywhere, with groups of two to eight players. Two cards are laid on the table, and one



Portable Skoolzy kit

image is always the same on both. The first person to spot it wins the cards and the player with the most cards at the end of the deck wins the game.

Older kids:

Card games

One deck of playing cards can be used to play myriad games, and with one player (solitaire) or more (rummy, crazy eights, go fish). Other fun,



Wireless and reusable, the Scribble and Play tablet

packable card games include Uno (this one comes in a tin travel box), Monopoly Deal and travel Scavenger Hunt.

Chess set

You know what passes the time? Learning how to play chess, and then playing a few rounds. A magnetic chess set is screen-free, strategic fun, and folds down and stores pieces when it's time to pack up.



Stack of blank adhesive notes on a wooden desk

Mad Libs

First introduced in the 1950s and still silly, side-splitting fun, kids can flex creative muscles – and learn about nouns, verbs, and adjectives in the process – to build hilarious stories in the Mad Libs word game books. Plenty of different options are available, and there's also a dry-erase activity book option for more limitless entertainment

—www.lonelyplanet.com



Family of four playing cards in kitchen

Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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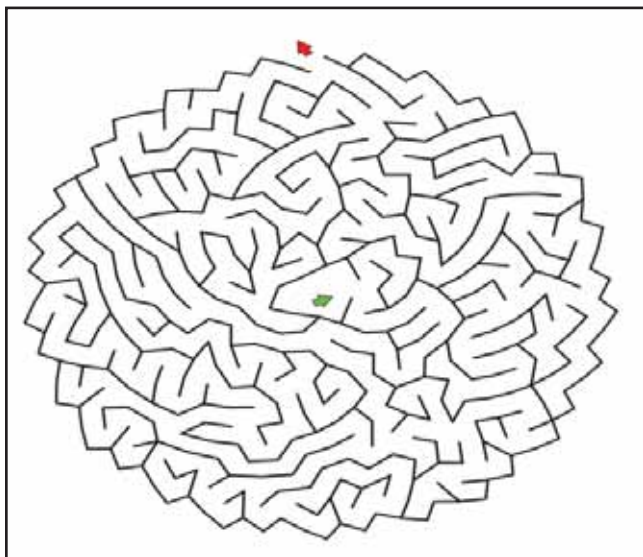
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Yesterday's Solution

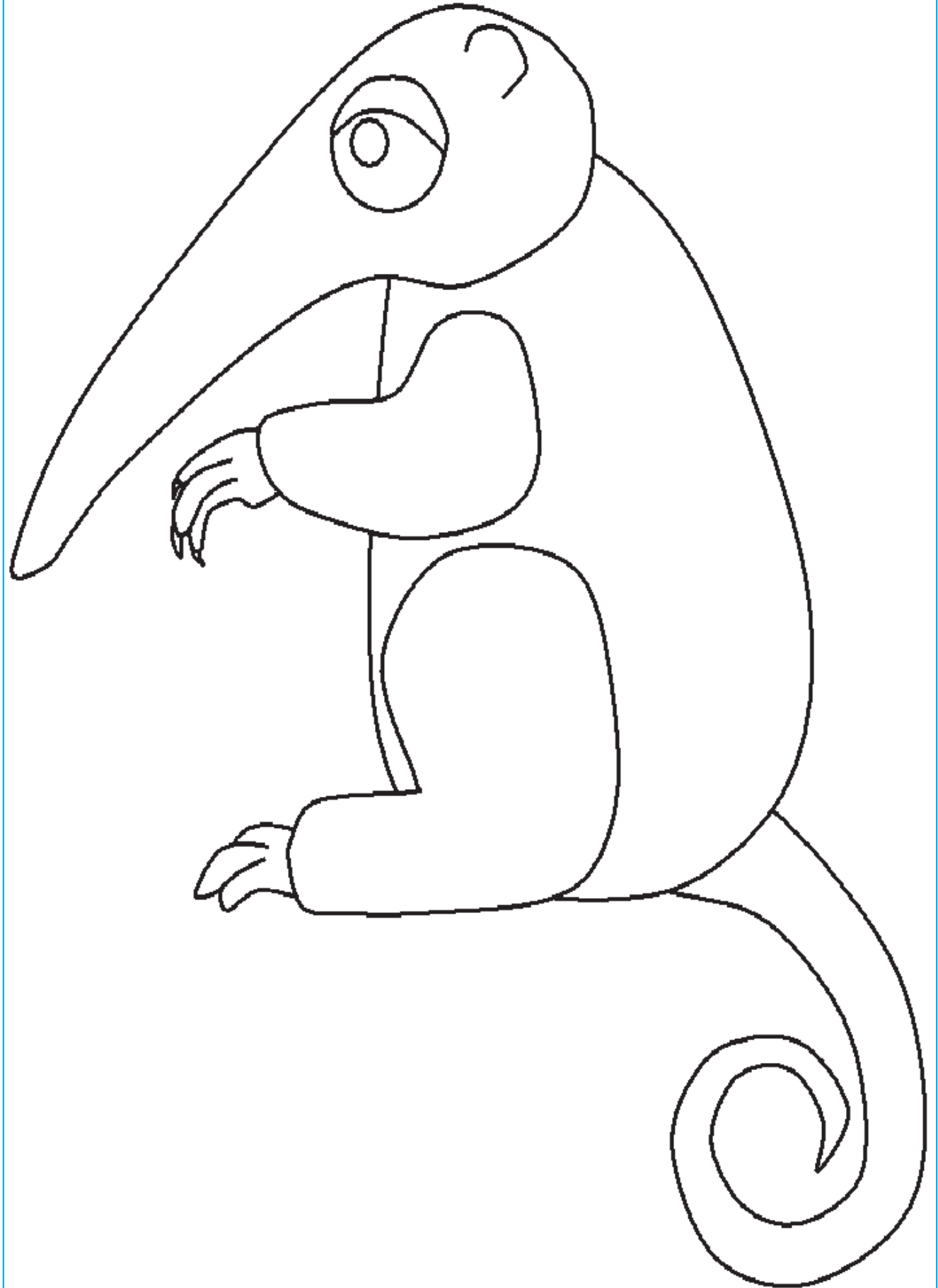
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very hard

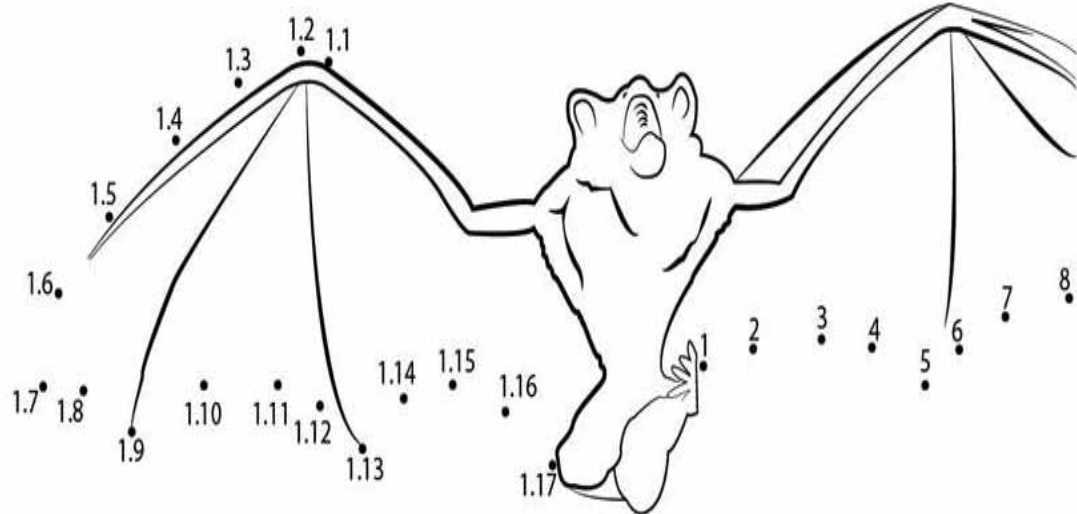
Kids Mazes



Color It



Join the dots



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

Parts Of An Engine

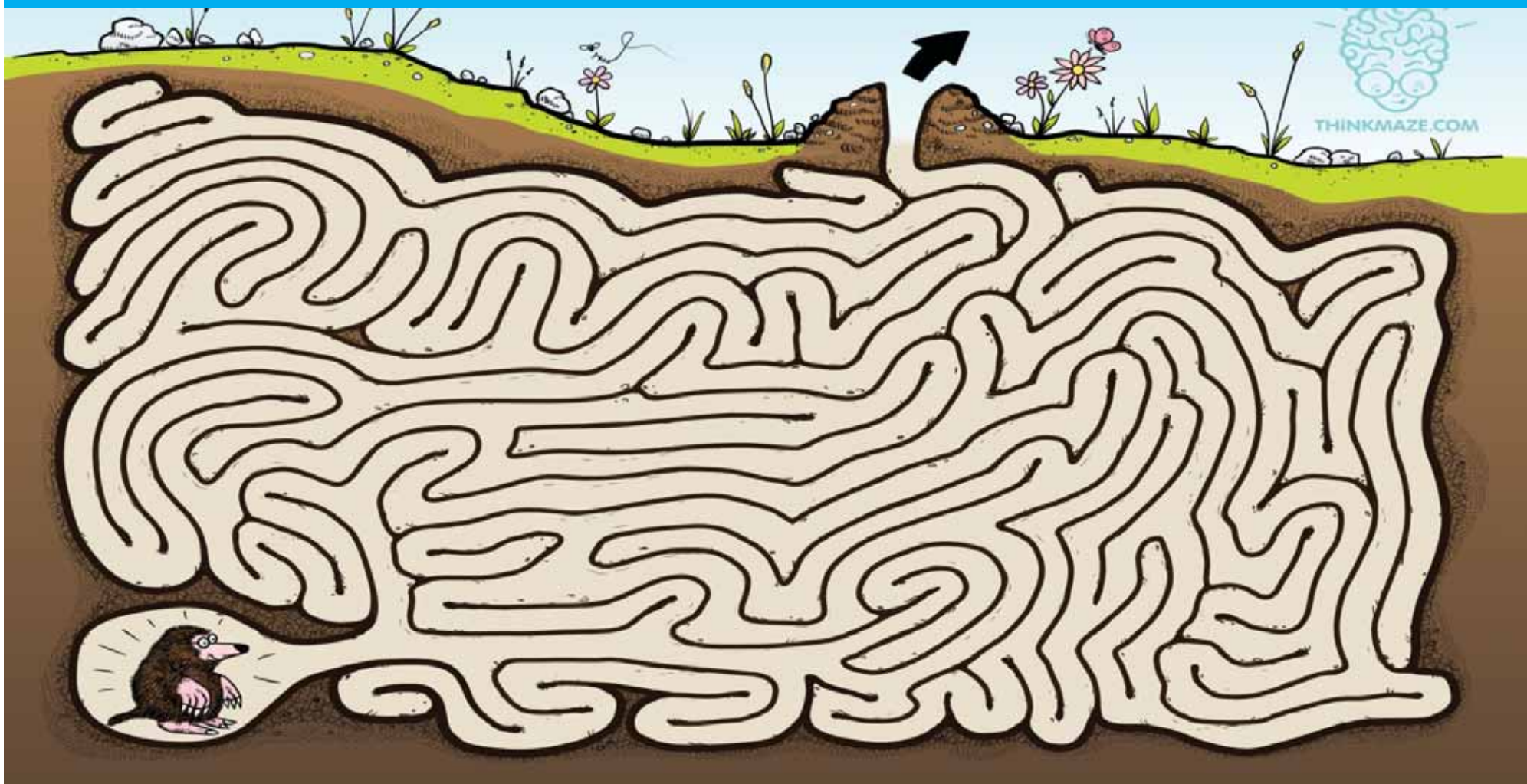
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- Cam Shaft
- Carburetor
- Connecting rod
- Crank Shaft
- Cylinder Block
- Cylinder Head
- Engine Valve



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| Exhaust Manifold | Piston |
| Flywheel | Radiator Fan |
| Fuel Injector | Sensor |
| Head Cover | Spark Plug |
| Inlet Manifold | Thermostat |
| Oil Filter | Throttle Body |
| Oil Pump | Timing chain |
| Oil Sump | Turbo Charger |

Find the way



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Kuwait Times

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Friday, May 8, 2020

DR. MOHAMMAD AL HAJRY
 Canadian Board of Otolaryngology
 Head & Neck Surgery and Facial Plastics.
 Fellow of Royal College of Surgeons-Canada
 A rare Subspecialty in Microscopic Ear Surgery, Cochlear implant & Ear diseases

- Diagnosis/ Treatment of General Ears, Nose, and Throat conditions in adults & pediatric
- Minimally invasive Endoscopic sinus surgery including Balloon sinuplasty
- Minimally invasive Microscopic & Endoscopic Ear surgery
- Diagnosis and treatment of Otolgy and Audiology (Hearing loss, Tinnitus & balance disorders)
- Facial Plastic and reconstructive surgeries (Rhinoplasty, Otoplasty, Fillers & Botox injections)
- Diagnosis & treatment of snoring & obstructive sleep apnea in clinic without surgery
- Diagnosis & Treatment of voice and swallowing disorders.
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- G.I. surgeries.
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Stars

STAR TRACK

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

It's time to elevate your sense of self, Aries. You're just as good as anyone else, so why don't you believe it? The problem is that you're very sensitive about having an ego. Even though you know everyone has an ego, you punish yourself for the existence of your own! This is a noble idea, but it doesn't do you any good. You'll never be perfect and neither will anyone else. The human experience is about change and growth, not perfection.

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

Today your intellectual and expressive abilities should receive a boost from the planets. It's an excellent time to organize your thoughts about presenting a project to a possible collaborator, engage in trade, or write. In terms of your private life, it's also a good time to examine the latest events, certain aspects of which are still partially misunderstood.

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

Overall, the forecast for today is fairly good. The aspects seem to favor figuring out the meaning of all that's transpired over the past several weeks. It's an opportunity for you to take a leisurely look at the distance you've covered moving toward your goals. Since it's an auspicious day for social activities, why not get on a video chat or start a text thread with friends and discuss the latest events with them?

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

Have you felt somewhat lost for the past few days? The fog may lift today and enable you to situate yourself at last. You're probably eager to settle a question that has nagged at you and interfered with your judgment. However, you should be patient, especially if it has to do with emotional matters. Try to understand, but don't take immediate action. You'll be more objective beginning tomorrow.

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

You may have been feeling somewhat disillusioned. Perhaps you lost sight of your goals or misplaced your faith in yourself. You'll feel some relief beginning today. This is an opportunity to end what has been a somewhat apathetic and moody phase and begin a new one that's based on work and meditation. As you can imagine, this new phase will be much more fulfilling!

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

You might be tempted to settle certain matters by radical means. The visionary part of you means you're painfully aware of the world's wrongs. You see no reason not to take action to correct them. But the forces in play are so powerful that you can't expect to institute a new order in one day. If you have an emotional question to resolve, it would be better to wait a few days before making a decision.

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

Today will be fairly calm in terms of outside events, but your inner world is likely to be in a rush of activity. Today you wish you could find the solution to your heartaches as well as your career predicaments. You'd like to achieve some supreme understanding of the events that took place over the past month. First, you must force your brain to slow down. Haste makes waste, as you know!

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

You have a lot of thinking to do about your professional goals, Scorpio. You'll go over the elements to see if there isn't some way to approach things differently. Are there new paths you could try or ways to improve things? Your mind will go a thousand miles a minute today. Those who interact with you may be totally exhausted by the end of the day because of all the questions you ask!

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

You just can't do everything at once, Sagittarius. How do you expect to reduce your stress and recuperate while you keep pushing yourself to be a superstar performer in every area of your life? Don't pressure yourself to perform today. If you do, you're likely to deplete your reserves even further. Take it easy, rest, and relax! You've earned this little break.

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

This is a good moment to adapt your logic and reason to reality, Capricorn. If you don't, you're going to run into some intellectual problems. Everyone knows that you are a wealth of new ideas, but unless you have plans to be a novelist, link these ideas to practical matters. The "pie in the sky" thinking that you engage in isn't particularly useful to the issues at hand that need your immediate attention.

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

It's going to be a little difficult talking to you today, Aquarius. You, who can be easily influenced by others, will be listening to and criticizing everything that people say. Nothing emotional or vague is going to get into your head. It's as if you've installed an extremely fine filter that lets in only what you allow. While people respect your expertise, please take care not to patronize or talk down to them.

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

Have you been reviewing your family history lately, Pisces? Of special interest is your cultural background. What educational, social, and religious environment were you born into? What are their values? In the end, do you feel a strong affinity with them now or are those views different from the ones you hold? These are interesting avenues of thought for you today.

Country Codes

| | | | |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------------------|--------|
| Afghanistan | 0093 | Iran | 0098 |
| Albania | 00355 | Iraq | 00964 |
| Algeria | 00213 | Ireland | 00353 |
| Andorra | 00376 | Italy | 0039 |
| Angola | 00244 | Ivory Coast | 00225 |
| Anguilla | 001264 | Jamaica | 001876 |
| Antigua | 001268 | Japan | 0081 |
| Argentina | 0054 | Jordan | 00962 |
| Armenia | 00374 | Kazakhstan | 007 |
| Australia | 0061 | Kenya | 00254 |
| Austria | 0043 | Kiribati | 00686 |
| Bahamas | 001242 | Kuwait | 00965 |
| Bahrain | 00973 | Kyrgyzstan | 00996 |
| Bangladesh | 00880 | Laos | 00856 |
| Barbados | 001246 | Latvia | 00371 |
| Belarus | 00375 | Lebanon | 00961 |
| Belgium | 0032 | Liberia | 00231 |
| Belize | 00501 | Libya | 00218 |
| Benin | 00229 | Lithuania | 00370 |
| Bermuda | 001441 | Luxembourg | 00352 |
| Bhutan | 00975 | Macau | 00853 |
| Bolivia | 00591 | Macedonia | 00389 |
| Bosnia | 00387 | Madagascar | 00261 |
| Botswana | 00267 | Majorca | 0034 |
| Brazil | 0055 | Malawi | 00265 |
| Brunei | 00673 | Malaysia | 0060 |
| Bulgaria | 00359 | Maldives | 00960 |
| Burkina Faso | 00226 | Mali | 00223 |
| Burundi | 00257 | Malta | 00356 |
| Cambodia | 00855 | Marshall Islands | 00692 |
| Cameroon | 00237 | Martinique | 00596 |
| Canada | 001 | Mauritania | 00222 |
| Cape Verde | 00238 | Mauritius | 00230 |
| Cayman Islands | 001345 | Mayotte | 00269 |
| Central African Republic | 00236 | Mexico | 0052 |
| Chad | 00235 | Micronesia | 00691 |
| Chile | 0056 | Moldova | 00373 |
| China | 0086 | Monaco | 00377 |
| Colombia | 0057 | Mongolia | 00976 |
| Comoros | 00269 | Montserrat | 001664 |
| Congo | 00242 | Morocco | 00212 |
| Cook Islands | 00682 | Mozambique | 00258 |
| Costa Rica | 00506 | Myanmar (Burma) | 0095 |
| Croatia | 00385 | Namibia | 00264 |
| Cuba | 0053 | Nepal | 00977 |
| Cyprus | 00357 | Netherlands (Holland) | 0031 |
| Cyprus (Northern) | 0090392 | Netherlands Antilles | 00599 |
| Czech Republic | 00420 | New Caledonia | 00687 |
| Denmark | 0045 | New Zealand | 0064 |
| Diego Garcia | 00246 | Nicaragua | 00505 |
| Djibouti | 00253 | Niger | 00227 |
| Dominica | 001767 | Nigeria | 00234 |
| Dominican Republic | 001809 | Niue | 00683 |
| Ecuador | 00593 | Norfolk Island | 00672 |
| Egypt | 0020 | Northern Ireland (UK) | 0044 |
| El Salvador | 00503 | North Korea | 00850 |
| England (UK) | 0044 | Norway | 0047 |
| Equatorial Guinea | 00240 | Oman | 00968 |
| Eritrea | 00291 | Pakistan | 0092 |
| Estonia | 00372 | Palau | 00680 |
| Ethiopia | 00251 | Panama | 00507 |
| Falkland Islands | 00500 | Papua New Guinea | 00675 |
| Faroe Islands | 00298 | Paraguay | 00595 |
| Fiji | 00679 | Peru | 0051 |
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| French Polynesia | 00689 | Puerto Rico | 001787 |
| Gabon | 00241 | Qatar | 00974 |
| Gambia | 00220 | Romania | 0040 |
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| Hungary | 0036 | Singapore | 0065 |
| Ibiza (Spain) | 0034 | Slovakia | 00421 |
| Iceland | 00354 | Slovenia | 00386 |
| India | 0091 | Solomon Islands | 00677 |
| Indian Ocean | 00873 | Somalia | 00252 |
| Indonesia | 0062 | South Africa | 0027 |

Business

FRIDAY, MAY 8, 2020

34 stc strengthens commitment to combat COVID-19



35 BoE holds off on fresh stimulus, sees worst slump in 300 years



36 Philippine economy shrinks first time in two decades



DUBAI: Yachts are seen at the deserted Dubai Marina after authorities of the United Arab Emirates started to ease a national lockdown. In Dubai's ritzy Marina district, white yachts are tethered to docks, standing idle — like many companies behind a luxury lifestyle industry battered by the coronavirus crisis. — AFP

Dubai's service sector faces unsure future

UAE allows businesses to lay off foreign employees

DUBAI: In Dubai's ritzy Marina district, white yachts are tethered to docks, standing idle—like many companies behind a luxury lifestyle industry battered by the coronavirus crisis. The boardwalks that snake around the precinct's artificial bays and canals, once packed with tourists, mostly from China, Russia and Britain, are now deserted.

"Nearly 95 percent, if not 100 percent, of turnover has been lost," the manager of a yacht charter company told AFP. When the United Arab Emirates halted all commercial flights and enforced a strict curfew to stem the spread of the disease, fishing trips and sightseeing excursions dried up "without warning", the young Frenchman said. Dubai, one of the seven emirates that make up the UAE, lacks the oil wealth of its neighbors.

But it has the most diversified economy in the Gulf, building a reputation as a financial, commercial and tourism hub that draws some 16 million visitors a year. The cosmopolitan city state's services sector is fuelled by hundreds of thou-

sands of foreigners, ranging from the super-rich to low-income migrant workers behind the scenes of the highlife.

Together, they have helped create and operate a city packed with gleaming office districts as well as megamalls, luxury resorts and tourist attractions such as an indoor ski slope and a bar on the 124th floor of the world's tallest tower, Burj Khalifa. While the UAE has so far recorded more than 15,000 coronavirus infections and 146 deaths, some lockdown measures have been lifted and many business have reopened.

However, for both employers and employees, uncertainty remains.

'Most vulnerable'

The yacht manager said his firm is now allowed to restart limited services but there was "very little demand". Many residents are too nervous to emerge from their homes, he said, and it is the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan when daily life tends to slow down.

"At this rate, we can hold out until the end of the year or beginning of January," he told AFP.

The Frenchman, who asked not to be named, said the company has lost up to \$80,000 since the crisis erupted. Employees had received 50 percent of their salaries in March and were asked to take unpaid leave last month. Capital Economics said that with high debt, a struggling real estate sector, rising competition from neighbors and an economy already in difficulties, Dubai is particularly exposed to the fallout from the pandemic. "Governments around the world, including Dubai's, have imposed draconian social distancing measures and travel restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus," it said.

"Dubai is the most vulnerable of the economies in the Middle East and North Africa to the economic damage from such measures." The research firm's economist, James Swanston, said that while the whole services sector, which makes up about 80 percent of Dubai's economy, will be hit, tourism, wholesale and retail trade will

be worst affected. "We estimated that if measures of social distancing and travel restrictions are in place for three to four months that this would knock around 5-6 percent off GDP at least this year," he told AFP.

Workers fired

The UAE has announced a \$70-billion stimulus package and other measures to support the economy, including tax relief and exemption from fees, while allowing businesses to lay off foreign employees, reduce wages or impose unpaid leave. Among those at risk is Lila, a Nepalese employee of one of the multitude of cleaning services companies that drop off uniformed women to homes and businesses across Dubai in minibuses. The 23-year-old arrived in Dubai just before the pandemic broke out, recruited-at a fee-by a company that provides cleaners to people's homes with the click of an app. Already some of Lila's colleagues have been fired and are waiting to go back to their home countries, mostly in Asia. —AFP

Business

Gulf Insurance Group first used in Kuwait blockchain technology

GIG partners with Addenda Technologies to digitize claims process



GIG Group CEO Khaled Al-Hasan

KUWAIT: Gulf Insurance Group (gig), one of the leading insurance service providers in the Middle East and North Africa region announced that it has partnered with “Addenda Technologies”, a blockchain technology startup that specializes in streamlining processes between insurance companies, to fast track the claims process and digitize recoveries.

Addenda offers a motor recovery solution through a secure blockchain network to allow insurance companies

in the market to recover claims digitally, saving time and cost. This solution allows increased transparency, real time balances that would cut down the recovery settlement from months to few days. Gig is the first in Kuwait to use blockchain platform, which will allow for minimal business disruption in times of crisis as well as eliminating face-to-face meetings for motor claim handlers. gig plans to first launch this solution in Kuwait, followed by its other countries of operation.

Khaled M. Al-Sanousi, Group Senior Manager at gig said, “We are pleased to have partnered with Addenda and this collaboration constitutes yet another move in line with gig’s digital strategy. The solution will not only boost our efficiency in the motor recovery process, but will also ease the process for our clients who will experience a smoother and more efficient approach. It’s worth to mention that recently, gig has acquired a sizable stake in yallacompare, an in-

surance aggregator and one of the leading companies of its kind in the Middle East. The Group ensures to avail the best innovative solutions and technologies to benefit our valued stakeholders.”

Walid Dib, founder and CEO of Addenda added, “The ability to share data in real-time through a trusted digital layer is a game changer and will offer tremendous benefits to the Kuwait market. We’re happy to have gig as our first partner in this regard.”

General Motors profits dive

WASHINGTON: General Motors said Wednesday it aims to reopen most US and Canadian manufacturing operations on May 18 as it reported a steep drop in first-quarter earnings due to the coronavirus. The company plans to ramp its plants back up gradually, implementing hygiene and monitoring practices from GM factories now building ventilators and protective masks to confront the health crisis.

“We’ll start in a very cadenced and thoughtful way of first shift then growing to two or three shifts, depending on the plant and the demand,” said Chief Executive Mary Barra. The US auto giant reported that first-quarter earnings plunged 86 percent to \$294 million on a 6.2 percent decline in revenues to \$32.7 billion.

Still, GM was the only one of Detroit’s “Big Three” to post a profit during the period, and shares rose sharply. Global car sales fell by more than one-fifth during the quarter, with the biggest hit in China, where the coronavirus raged for much of the period.

Car sales also declined in the United States, although the impact was mitigated by gains in GM’s full-size pickups. Analysts expect a bigger decline in US sales in the second quarter. Many GM dealers are open for service and online car sales, but retail operations are skeletal otherwise. GM estimated the overall hit from the coronavirus in the first quarter at \$1.4 billion.

Revamped plants

Barra said the company has been working closely with unions and government officials on the plans for the restart. People entering factories will do a self-assessment questionnaire and have their temperature screened. Other protocols require frequent hand washing, additional cleaning of stations, physical



The GMC logo is seen during the 2017 North American International Auto Show in Detroit. — AFP

distancing standards and the wearing of a mask. “The three primary focuses are keeping people who are sick or potentially sick out of the plant, maintaining an environment and then if someone is asymptomatic and is in that plant, a very targeted way to clean and do contact tracing to limit the exposure,” Barra said. “Over the last several weeks, we’ve been able to demonstrate that’s been quite successful.”

The United Auto Workers praised “great” steps to reconfigure plants and will continue to monitor the situation, said UAW President Rory Gamble. “We continue to advocate for as much testing as possible at the current time and eventually full-testing when available,” Gamble said.

“As for the start date, the companies contractually make that decision and we all knew this day would come. Our UAW focus and role is and will continue to be on health and safety protocols to protect our members.”

GM executives said they were focused on ramping up construction of popular pickup and sport-utility vehicles that have continued to sell fairly well, especially away from the coasts of the United States in the interior of the country. Executives acknowledged that they ramped up sales incentives of some of the vehicles during the quarter, but said they were in response to offerings from rivals and were committed to “disciplined” practices. — AFP

stc strengthens commitment to combat COVID-19

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced a new fever screening thermal camera that uses advanced technology to detect high body temperatures and home isolation monitoring bracelets. The advanced products using the latest technology solutions are meant to complement the government’s attempts to curb the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

In a statement released by stc, the Company highlighted that the initiative led by General Manager of Sales & Account Management at stc, Meshari Al-Hamad, focused on providing digital solutions to detect high body temperatures to avoid the risk of spreading infection. The fever screening thermal camera, offered by stc as fixed, hand-held, helmet-mountable, or touch-free access control cameras with facial recognition, work instantaneously in detecting individuals with elevated body temperatures. The camera applies a sophisticated algorithm to high thermal sensors, offering great stability and high accuracy reading levels to ensure accurate detection.

Upon detecting an abnormal body temperature, the system sends out an alert notification to inform the user. Other features include instant voice alerts notifying absence of facemasks, touch-free functionality, ease of mobility and a wide range of customizable options.

stc also offers the monitoring bracelets, which function within the parameters enforced by the Kuwait government’s strict directions to obey isolation protocols. The purpose of these bracelets are to ensure that



individuals suspected to be infected remain at home. Once the bracelet is activated and online, it tracks the individual’s movements around the clock and sends notifications to an assigned Emergency Command Centre.

stc reported that thermal cameras are currently in use across the world on the front-line of defense against the COVID-19 pandemic. The technology has proven to be an effective method to rapidly detect high temperatures, even within a crowded area. stc installed thermal cameras at its headquarters to showcase its ‘Lead by example’ initiative. As recommended by the Kuwaiti government, the Company insists that home isolation is the right way forward to reduce the pressure on health care providers as well as those working in the frontline to battle the virus.

stc’s thermal cameras can also be easily upgraded to incorporate AI backed facial recognition across a variety of thermal screening devices. Through a powerful software used to analyze temperatures both online and offline, each camera displays live temperature readings on any connected screen of individuals within proximity suspected of COVID-19 infections. Through this method, individuals can be detected and identified before mixing with a crowd at any office, mall or similar public areas. stc concluded by urging all citizens and residents to stay safe by staying home, follow the government’s directions and refrain from any interactions that may compromise the wellbeing of loved ones or other individuals.

Business

BoE holds off on fresh stimulus, sees worst slump in 300 years

Monetary policy committee keeps rate at its all-time low of 0.1%

LONDON: The Bank of England held off further stimulus measures but said it was ready to take fresh action to counter the coronavirus hammering which could cause the country's biggest economic slump in over 300 years in 2020 before a bounce-back in 2021. The BoE said its Monetary Policy Committee kept Bank Rate at its all-time low of 0.1 percent and left its target for bond-buying, most of it British government debt, at 645 billion pounds (\$797 billion).

However, two of its nine policymakers - Michael Saunders and Jonathan Haskel - voted for 100 billion pounds' worth of more bond-buying firepower. In what it called an illustrative scenario, the BoE said it saw a plunge of 14 percent in Britain's economy in 2020 followed by 15 percent bounce-back in 2021.

Such a scenario would require very significant monetary and fiscal stimulus, it said.

Many economists expect the BoE to increase its asset purchase program next month, before the extra 200 billion pounds it

gave itself in March is exhausted by the furious pace of its buying of British government debt. "However the economic outlook evolves, the Bank will act as necessary to deliver the monetary and financial stability that are essential for long-term prosperity and meet the needs of the people of this country," Governor Andrew Bailey said.

"This is our total and unwavering commitment." Both decisions announced on Thursday were in line the forecasts of most economists in a Reuters poll. Britain's government has already rushed out spending and tax measures worth about 100 billion pounds to try to counter the effect of its coronavirus lockdown. The BoE said it expected a 25 percent plunge in British gross domestic product in the April-June period with the unemployment rate more than doubling to 9 percent.

Sterling rose after the central bank's announcement, initially gaining half a cent against the US dollar before falling back a bit. Last week, the US Federal Reserve restated a pledge to keep interest rates low and con-



A picture shows the facade of the Bank of England in the City of London. —AFP

tinue offering trillions of dollars in credit as long as the economy needs it, and the Euro-

pean Central Bank kept the door open to further stimulus. —Reuters

Argentina's joust with bondholders likely to drag on

BUENOS AIRES: A war of nerves between Argentina and international creditors over restructuring its massive debt is likely to continue unabated past a Friday deadline, analysts say. The sides are deadlocked after the three main bondholder groups rejected the government's restructuring offer, unwilling to swallow "disproportionate" losses on their investment.

Argentine Economy Minister Martin Guzman has taken an aggressive stance on debt, in part driven by a need to free up resources to fight the novel coronavirus pandemic in the recession-hit South American grain and beef exporter. He said this week that his government, though willing, "does not have the capacity to pay." No one in Buenos Aires' financial or political circles believes negotiations will end Friday. The dogfight with bondholders is likely to continue until May 22, the end of a 30-day grace period for a \$500 million bond payment Argentina has already missed.

Failure to pay would mean a default, a near doomsday scenario for the cash-strapped country that would prevent Argentina from seeking credit from the financial markets.

"Default is not in anyone's interests," says Matias Rajnerman, an economist with analysts Eco-

latina. As it stands, Argentina's offer to bondholders includes a three-year grace period on debt repayment, a 62 percent haircut on interest amounting to \$37.9 billion, and 5.4 percent on principal or \$3.6 billion. "Argentina saying that this is its final offer doesn't mean that it is—it's a negotiating position," said Victor Beker, head of the Center for Economic Studies at Argentina's Belgrano University.

By the end of 2019 Argentina had accumulated a massive \$323 billion debt, equivalent to 90 percent of its GDP. Forty-four billion dollars of that debt is owed to the International Monetary Fund, part of the \$57 billion bailout in 2018 to the previous center-right government of president Mauricio Macri. His successor, President Alberto Fernandez, who took office in December, rejected the last tranche of the money, saying the last thing his country needed was more debt it could not afford to repay.

"The room to make improvements is limited," Eurasia's Daniel Kerner said in a note ahead of Friday's deadline. "The administration will likely wait for bondholders to make a proposal and could accept it if it is within its objectives, especially in terms of lowering interest rates and maintaining a long grace-period." Fernandez has an unlikely ally in the IMF, which deemed Argentina's debt "unsustainable." This week the government also won support from large employers, workers' unions and the country's regional governors over its debt restructuring stance. Two years of recession have dragged the economy down, and this year's GDP is expected to contract more than 6 percent, as exports have plummeted. —AFP

Facebook-backed Libra appoints chief executive

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook-backed Libra Association on Wednesday named as its new top executive Stuart Levey, a former US Treasury official who headed team fighting financial crime.

Levey, who has most recently been chief legal officer at HSBC Holdings, will lead the group founded by Facebook to manage a global digital payments system.

Levey, who turns 57 in June, will work in Washington for the Geneva-based association beginning this summer. "I am honored to join the Libra Association as it charts a bold path forward to harness the power of technology to transform the global payments landscape," Levey said in a release.

Prior to joining major financial institution HSBC, Levey served as the first under secretary of the Treasury for terrorism and financial intelligence during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. "Stuart brings to the Libra Association the rare combination of an accomplished leader in both the government, where he enjoyed bipartisan respect and influence, and the private sector where he managed teams spread across the globe," said Katie Haun, a member of the Libra board.

Levey's credentials could help reassure



Stuart Levey

regulators around the world fearful that Libra threatens their sovereignty and could enable criminal financial dealings to avoid detection. The association is seeking approval for digital coins in individual currencies, revamping its cryptocurrency initiative in a move aimed at minimizing disruption to the global monetary system. A plan submitted to Swiss regulators could scale back the ambitious digital money initiative unveiled last year and touted as tool for financial inclusion but slammed by global monetary leaders.

Under the new plan, separate "stablecoins" would be created and pegged to real-world money such as the US dollar and the euro. The association, which includes Facebook and a variety of partners, said a shift to using individual currencies was made after hearing comments and complaints on its original proposal. Libra, a high-profile project launched by social network giant Facebook, is tentatively scheduled to launch this year but has been battered by severe criticism from some of the world's most influential financial authorities. —AFP

Business

Philippine economy shrinks first time in two decades

The worst is yet to come as nation reels from COVID-19

MANILA: The Philippine economy contracted for the first time in more than two decades during the first quarter, but officials warned yesterday that the worst was likely yet to come as the nation reels from the coronavirus pandemic. Gross domestic product shrank 0.2 percent in January-March, its worst performance since 1998 during the Asian financial crisis as the Philippines joins a long line of countries to report devastating figures as a result of widespread lockdowns that have shut down economies.

"Containing the spread of the virus and saving hundreds of thousands of lives, though the imposition of the (quarantine) has come at great cost to the Philippine economy," Economic Planning Acting Secretary Karl Chua said. The January eruption of the Taal volcano, which forced the temporary closure of Manila's main international airport, also took a toll.

Chua said there would be more pain and the economy could further shrink in the second quarter.

"The first quarter, I think, is still respectable given the very difficult environment that we are

in. The second quarter might be worse," he said. Growth in consumer spending, which is the Philippines' key economic driver, slowed to just 0.2 percent during the period, hit by the closure of malls and shopping centres in areas under lockdown. Many areas in the Philippines have been under quarantine since mid-March, and will remain so until at least mid-May, to contain the spread of the virus, including Manila and surrounding areas where most economic activity takes place.

"The current lockdown... will undoubtedly drag GDP deep into contraction as we see how destructive the enhanced community quarantine can be for the consumption-driven economy," ING senior economist Nicholas Mapa said. But Chua added that the country could bounce back in the second half of the year as it gradually reopens businesses, adding: "With the progress that we are seeing on the health side, there is a very strong chance that we will have a good recovery."

The Philippines has detected more than 10,000 coronavirus cases and more than 600 people have died. —AFP



CAINTA: Marlene Cenina, 39, sewer, works making Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for frontliners, in Cainta, Philippines. Cenina lost her job as a sewer after the lockdown and is now working as a volunteer to make personal protective equipment (PPE). —AFP

COVID-19 ignites steep losses at Air France-KLM

PARIS: Air France-KLM yesterday posted sharply higher first-quarter losses as the coronavirus pandemic trampled on global travel. The airline group said it had suffered a net loss of 1.8 billion euros (\$1.94 billion) in the first three months of the year, more than five times its 324-million-euro loss in the first quarter of 2019. Air France-KLM highlighted 455 million euros in fuel purchases that were never used because of the pandemic.

The first-quarter result underscored the effect of the virus crisis in March.

The group noted "a strong performance at the start of the year with passenger unit revenue up 0.8 percent" at the end of February. "March 2020 however was strongly impacted by the expansion of the virus and consequential globally imposed travel restrictions to counter the spread of the Covid-19 virus." The group, which is to benefit from 7.0 billion euros in French state aid along with several billion euros in aid from the Dutch government, said its capacity had fallen by 10.5 percent in the quarter.

It predicted "a progressive lifting of border restrictions in 2020, enabling a slow capacity resumption" in the summer, but also "a prolonged negative impact on passenger demand, not expected to recover to pre-crisis levels before several years." —AFP

Post-lockdown economic scenarios

LONDON: Predicting the shape of recovery after a downturn in the business cycle is a favorite parlor game for economists and the coronavirus-induced plunge in business activity has resurrected the usual range of options.

Some forecasters see a fairly rapid and complete recovery once the lockdowns are lifted (V-shaped) while others see a delayed upturn (U-shaped) or a stuttering period of recoveries and renewed downturns (W-shaped). More ambitious forecasters have raided the semiotic catalogue to propose recoveries shaped like a check-mark, a square root sign or a Nike Swoosh.

But the most likely outcome for both the economy and the oil market is an initial fast-but-partial recovery followed by a slower and more difficult phase. If that proves to be the case, the expansion will look a lot like the one after the recession in 2008/09 - which saw rapid growth in late 2009 and early 2010, followed by more disappointing and uneven performance in 2011/12.

Calling recession

"During a recession, a significant decline in economic activity spreads across the economy and can last from a few months to more than a year," the US National Bureau of Economic Research says. NBER is a private sector organization rather than a government agency but its business cycle dating committee has become the commonly-accepted arbiter of the business cycle in the United States.

The committee normally waits until the existence of a peak or trough is not in doubt and it can assign an accurate peak or trough date. For this reason, the onset of a recession or recovery is often announced many months after it occurred, in some cases more than a year later.

The last recession started in December 2007 but it was not announced for 15 months. The last recovery started in June 2009 but was not announced for 11 months. The last recovery started in June 2009 but was not announced for 15 months. In some ways, the recent slump in business activity is much easier to date. Most indicators show US activity was still expanding in February but fell sharply in March and even more severely in April.

Coronavirus-induced lockdowns abruptly cut off an expansion that was very mature (128 months) but still appeared to have reasonable underlying momentum. February (or possibly March) marked the peak of the expansion as well as the onset of the contraction on the standard definition.

Unusual downturn

The trickier question is whether the sudden slump in business activity qualifies as a recession at all, or is something else. The slump in March/April certainly qualifies as "a significant decline in economic activity," the most significant one since the 1930s. But the second part of the definition talks about a decline that "spreads across the economy" and it is less obvious that this is a good description of what happened in March and April.

Recessions are transmitted through an economy as a downturn in business activity, incomes and employment spreads, like an epidemic, from a few households to a wider section of society. Recessions are normally characterized by second, third and subsequent rounds of business closures, income declines and employment losses as the initial shock is transmitted and amplified. Like epidemics, recessions are social phenomena, in which the initial shock (or infection) spreads and accelerates through the links between firms and households.

Recessions are therefore social processes in which expectations and narratives play a critical role, which distinguishes them from single or complex events such as natural disasters (earthquakes) and manmade catastrophes (war). But that is not a good description of what happened in March and April when many businesses were ordered to cease operating as part of virus-control measures. If the current downturn does qualify as a recession, rather than something else, then it is very different from the recession of 2008/09 or any other recession for a hundred years.

The characterization of the events of March and April matters because it will determine what happens next in the business cycle. If it was simply a pause in business activity, the economy might bounce back quickly. The downturn turn out to be one of the deepest but also the shortest on record, and might not even qualify as a proper recession. In one extreme example, the level of activity might have peaked in February, declined in March, reached a trough in April, before starting to rise again in May as the lockdown is relaxed and at least some businesses re-open. —Reuters

Sports

Taiwan baseball draws foreign fans during sports shutdown

Coronavirus devastates the global sporting calendar

TAOYUAN: Foreign fans starved of baseball are tuning in to Taiwan's often-overlooked league as the island basks in the glow of being one of the few places in the world hosting live sports. The coronavirus pandemic has devastated the global sporting calendar but Taiwan has largely halted local transmissions and its Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) has kept on batting. All of the league's four teams have begun streaming games with English commentary, racking up millions of views for games featuring cardboard cut-outs of fans and robots beating drums.

"A lot of people back home in the US are dying to get sports back, they are really just trying to find something to watch," Ryan Carpenter, an American born pitcher for Rakuten Monkeys said. "I think having English commentaries really helps." Rakuten Monkeys, owned by the Japanese e-commerce giant, was the first team to broadcast in English with nearly five million views for its first five games of this season. The debut English broadcast for Chinatrust Brothers via Twitter on Tuesday also attracted more than one million views.

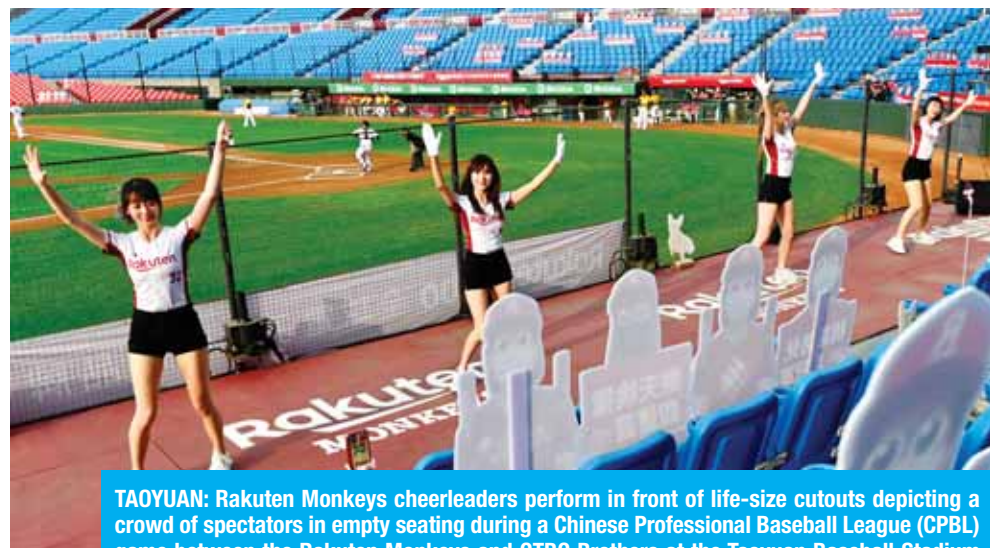
Analysts say much of the interest is coming from the United States where Major League Baseball remains shuttered. "This is the biggest secret little league that no one knows about," Rob Liu, who runs the English-language CPBL Stats blog, told AFP, adding traffic to his site has

increased tenfold, mainly from the US and Canada. "We would have never thought about counting the CPBL," added Brandon DuBreuil from Covers.com, a North American sports betting information company. "People are betting on it."

'Home runs everywhere'

Introduced a century ago by Japan when Taiwan was a colony, baseball is easily the island's most popular sport with notoriously raucous and excitable fans. The league has been peppered with betting scandals—most recently in 2009, after which attendance plunged. But crowd size and enthusiasm has bounced back, especially after former MLB star slugger Manny Ramirez briefly joined the league in 2013 and reignited a frenzy of interest.

Those tuning in from abroad will see "an offensive style of baseball", according to DuBreuil, who lived in Taiwan for 11 years. "There are some really great hitters and the runs are through the roof. There are home runs everywhere," he said. Alongside Taiwan, South Korea is the only professional league now running. This season the usually packed stands in Taiwan have been devoid of fans as part of anti-virus measures—although from Friday, a maximum of 1,000 spectators will be allowed in with social distancing measures in place.



TAOYUAN: Rakuten Monkeys cheerleaders perform in front of life-size cutouts depicting a crowd of spectators in empty seating during a Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL) game between the Rakuten Monkeys and CTBC Brothers at the Taoyuan Baseball Stadium amid the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

Thanks to effective tracing, quarantine and testing, Taiwan has reported just 439 confirmed cases and six deaths despite its close proximity to China. As Rakuten Monkeys took on Chinatrust Brothers last weekend, the home stands were filled with mannequins and life-sized,

cardboard pictures of fans dressed in Rakuten's red colors. A troupe of robots banged drums while the team's cheerleaders broadcast their dance routines to fans on mobile phones. One dancer even live-streamed herself eating barbecued food. — AFP

Australia's Burns sees silver lining in 'longest offseason'

MELBOURNE: Having been struck down by a fatigue illness last year, Australia opener Joe Burns sees a silver lining in cricket's long offseason due to the coronavirus shutdown. With all cricket suspended and Australia still largely locked down to contain COVID-19, Burns and his team mates have plenty of time to kill before returning to the field. For Burns, home isolation has not been all bad and has actually offered a welcome chance to recharge the batteries.

"Definitely this enforced layoff for everyone provides the opportunity just to really get yourself right, reset and start preparing physically for next summer," Burns told reporters in a video conference yesterday. "It's probably the longest offseason any of us would have had for a long time. "From a physical perspective it gives the opportunity for us to be in a really strong position. "I think that's the silver lining."

Prior to COVID-19, modern cricketers had never been so busy, with players opting to fill the shrinking spaces in the international calendar with stints in domestic tournaments. Playing in England last year, Burns abruptly left county side Lancashire after one match to

come home and recuperate from a chronic fatigue condition that doctors traced to an infection the previous year. He was omitted from the Ashes squad but regained his spot in the home summer, enjoying a fruitful opening partnership with David Warner in series against Pakistan and New Zealand.

"There are times during the year where you do get a little bit worn out, a little bit tired and you do want some time at home," said the 30-year-old, who was awarded one of 20 national contracts handed out by Cricket Australia last week. "It's the other end of the spectrum now ... You can't wait just to get out there on the cricket field and running around with your mates, getting stuck into training and playing games." He said he was learning, slowly, how to cook and had been using a cricket stump to bash a golf ball tied to a rope, Don Bradman-style, in his garage-turned-gym.

While noting that his pay might shrink without a resumption of cricket, he was calm about the financial impact of COVID-19, saying players had not been asked to take any pay cut by the board as yet. With June's scheduled two-match series against Bangladesh postponed indefinitely, Burns is pinning his hopes on India being able to tour in the home summer, which would offer an intriguing series between Tim Paine's top-ranked test side and Virat Kohli's world number two team. — Reuters

Hugs and rugby on agenda as NZ eases lockdown

WELLINGTON: Super Rugby in New Zealand (NZ) is poised to resume when the country relaxes its COVID-19 lockdown, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said yesterday, with bars, retailers and schools also set to open. Ardern is due to announce next Monday whether New Zealand will move to 'Alert Level 2', which allows significantly more freedom than Kiwis have experienced since lockdown began in late March.

While she stressed no decision had yet been made, Ardern acknowledged New Zealand's success in containing the virus had put it in a good position to cautiously relax the rules. "Think of ourselves as halfway down Everest," she said. "It's clear that no one wants to hike back up that peak and the descent is known to be even more dangerous."

New Zealand, with a population of five million, has recorded 1,139 coronavirus cases and 21 deaths. The number of new cases has been in single digits since April 14, with just one new infection recorded yesterday. Under New Zealand's four-tier alert system, social distancing protocols are enforced less stringently under level two, allowing contact sports including the

national game of rugby union. "Professional sport will be able to resume domestically under level two," Ardern said.

"Super Rugby and the netball premiership have already confirmed their intention to resume a domestic competition, which I know will be cause for great excitement." New Zealand's five Super Rugby teams have been out of action since the lockdown began and the game's governing body said once clearance was confirmed it would have a competition running within four weeks. "We're delighted for our fans that in a best-case scenario we will have top-quality rugby back on our screens next month," New Zealand Rugby chief executive Mark Robinson said.

He said the competition would see the five teams play over 10 rounds in closed stadiums. Ardern emphasised New Zealand's borders would remain closed and Kiwis would have to adapt to a "new normal" under level two. "It's designed to get as many people back to work as possible and get the economy running, but safely," she said. Bars and restaurants can reopen, but with a maximum of 100 people, while hairdressers and beauticians will need to wear personal protective equipment.

Shopping malls and other retail outlets will be back in business, while schools will have full classes after running a skeleton operation in recent weeks. Domestic travel will also be allowed, providing a boost for the hard-hit tourism industry. Health department director-general Ashley Bloomfield welcomed the prospect of more relaxed rules. — AFP

Sports

South Korea reboots COVID-19-hit football

No talking or goal celebrations

SEOUL: South Korea's football season kicks off today after a two-month coronavirus delay, leading the way for the global game as other leagues strive to return to action. Goal celebrations, handshakes and even talking are out under stringent new safety guidelines designed to prevent any contagion during games, which will be played behind closed doors. While countries such as Belarus, Turkmenistan and Taiwan defied the virus to keep playing football, South Korea - the 2002 World Cup co-hosts and semi-finalists - are the first prominent nation in the sport to allow matches.

South Korea endured one of the worst early outbreaks of COVID-19 outside China, prompting professional sports to suspend or delay their seasons, a pattern that was repeated worldwide. But the country appears to have flattened the curve thanks to an extensive "trace, test and treat" program, and football's return comes after baseball started without fans on Tuesday. The K-League is Asia's first major competition to return to action, while Europe's giants remain sidelined with only Germany's Bundesliga so far making concrete plans to resume.

Today's opening game will be between defending champions Jeonbuk Motors - who are managed by Jose Mourinho's former assistant Jose Morais - and Cup-holders Suwon Bluewings. Jeonbuk have been the dominant team for

the past decade, winning five of the last six league titles, and are again one of the favorites. Another top contender among the K-League's 12 teams are Ulsan, who have finished in the top four in each of the past four years.

But it will be football with a difference from Friday, with strict health checks and hygiene measures enforced on the field. Players and coaching staff are subject to temperature checks ahead of each game and if anyone gets infected during the season, the affected team and those who played against them will have to take a two-week break. Instead of the traditional pre-game handshakes, players have been asked to bow their heads from a distance, while also avoiding celebrating goals with teammates - and talking.

'Impossible not to talk'

The K-League's step-by-step response manual to the virus outbreak has been shared with some 40 professional football competitions worldwide including England's Premier League and Germany's Bundesliga, the K-League said. But questions have been raised about the new safety guidelines. "It's impossible not to talk to your teammates," Incheon United captain Kim Do-hyeok told reporters. "If we can't have conversations on the field, we may as well not play football at all."

The new K-League season will be an oasis of

live action in a world where sports fans have been starved of such content by the virus, with broadcasters resorting to repeats of matches from past years. The lack of live sport has resulted in a new-found global interest in South Korean football. Ten foreign broadcasters from China, Hong Kong to Croatia have purchased rights to air the upcoming season, while those in Germany, France, Italy, US and Australia have also made inquiries, the K-League said.

The K-League will livestream Friday's match on YouTube and Twitter with English-language graphics and commentary for international fans, it added in a statement. On the ground, the K-League said spectators will be allowed back into stadiums progressively as the government eases its quarantining measures. The new football season comes just two days after the return of professional baseball in South Korea, which has struck a television deal with ESPN for US fans. And South Korea will next week become the first country to see women's professional golf resume after COVID-19. South Korean players dominate women's golf with eight featuring in the world's top 20, including number one Ko Jin-young. The \$1.8 million Korea Ladies Professional Golf Association Championship begins on May 14 in Yangju, east of Seoul with world number six Kim Sei-young and 10th-ranked Lee Jeong-eun in the 144-strong field. — AFP



JEJU: Tottenham Hotspur's South Korean striker Son Heung-min (in military) uniform moves to a boot camp after a shooting exercise at a Marine Corps firing range during his basic military training in Jeju island. Son Heung-min began last month his three-week military training at a marines boot camp to fulfill military service duties, with the Premier League on hold over the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

NFL great Favre to repay \$1.1 million

LOS ANGELES: NFL Hall of Fame quarterback Brett Favre has begun repaying \$1.1 million he received in welfare money for speeches he never gave, the Mississippi state auditor said Wednesday. Shad White said in a statement that his office had received \$500,000 from Favre, who has also pledged to pay another \$600,000 in instalments over the coming months. On Monday, White had released an audit of spending by the Mississippi Department of Human Services that showed Favre had been paid \$1.1 million for three speaking engagements, a radio spot and a keynote address, none of which he participated in.

The money came from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which is funded by the federal government to aid impoverished families. White said in a statement there was no indication that Favre, who was paid through the non-profit Mississippi Community Education Center (MCEC) - knew that was the case. "Today my office has received \$500,000 from Brett Favre in repayment for TANF money he was paid through

MCEC and a commitment to repay the remainder in instalments over the next few months," White said.

"The money will be held in our clearing account for a period and then be sent, in full, to the Mississippi Department of Human Services to be used for TANF-appropriate expenditures. "I want to applaud Mr Favre for his good faith effort to make this right and make the taxpayers and TANF families whole," White added. "To date, we have seen no records indicating Mr. Favre knew that TANF was the program that served as the source of the money he was paid."

In the audit report released on Monday, White said his office found that more than \$94 million of federal grant money that went to the Department of Human Services in Mississippi - one of the poorest states in the United States - was allegedly spent improperly, converted to personal use, spent on family members and friends or wasted.

A former Human Services director and five others, including a former director of the MCEC, were indicted on state charges of embezzling some \$4 million in TANF funds and have pleaded not guilty. Favre, who won a Super Bowl with the Packers in the 1996 season before retiring in 2010 as a member of the Minnesota Vikings, is a Mississippi native who now lives in the state. — AFP

Inter Miami among MLS clubs making return to training

MIAMI: David Beckham's Major League Soccer team made a welcome return to training on Wednesday even if a raft of coronavirus protocols brutally laid bare the problems of battling a global pandemic and resuming normal service. Inter Miami were one of four MLS franchises to have players working out at their training facilities for the first time since the league was suspended on March 12 as the COVID-19 crisis wreaked havoc upon the sporting world.

MLS, who have suspended play until June 8 at the earliest, are allowing all clubs to have their players return based on advice from their local and state health authorities. Orlando, Atlanta and Sporting Kansas also took up the option yet during a video call with reporters, Inter Miami sporting director Paul McDonough, sounded a note of caution for anyone hoping top level sport in the United States is heading for a swift return.

McDonough was delighted to have virtually a full squad reporting back for duty, with players only allowed on site after answering an MLS health and safety questionnaire that asked if they'd had a fever, felt ill or had a cough recently. Players parked three spaces away from one another in the car park and were greeted by staff

members wearing personal protective equipment.

Their temperatures were then taken and once an individual, one hour training session was completed, they departed in a similar manner. While the United Soccer League - which is effectively the second tier in the United States - had already introduced 'non-contact training in small groups,' MLS are moving forward with extreme caution. "We split the group into two segments and split the field into four," said McDonough who has been in constant contact with Beckham via Zoom.

"There were two entry points to the fields and a trainer in PPE would come to the car, take their temperature, sanitize their hands and then the players would then put on a face mask and go to their assigned quadrant in the facility. "We funneled them all through, they did their work and the coaches were present while respecting social distancing barriers. "No player was allowed in our building." There have been more than 38,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Florida with just over 1,500 deaths, according to statistics released on Wednesday. "The players have found the last seven weeks very difficult," said McDonough who stressed squad members wouldn't be in every day and would continue to supplement their training schedules at home. "The parks have been closed and there was nowhere to work out but as soon as the parks started opening, we thought about everything because if they are in a park, you can't protect them from people coming up to them and recognizing them and wanting selfies. — AFP

Sports

Villas-Boas leads Marseille back into Champions League

Doubts linger over future

MARSEILLE: The decision to end the French Ligue 1 season early brought celebrations in Marseille, who are looking forward to a return to the Champions League thanks to the fine work done by coach Andre Villas-Boas, but it remains to be seen if he will stay at a club with major financial problems. Marseille were second when the season was suspended in mid-March with 10 games remaining. They were well behind leaders Paris Saint-Germain but well clear of the chasing pack, so nobody disputes they are worthy runners-up after the French government dashed hopes of the campaign restarting.

In an Instagram post, Villas-Boas called it an “extraordinary achievement”. Marseille have not been in the Champions League since 2013, but they had finished fifth last season under Rudi Garcia and Villas-Boas knew he was arriving at a club with little money to spend. He had to do without arguably Marseille’s best player, the winger Florian Thauvin, for almost the whole

campaign because of injury, but the Portuguese has breathed new life into the careers of Dimitri Payet and goalkeeper Steve Mandanda.

In addition, he has got the best out of those new faces who did come in, like Spanish defender Alvaro Gonzalez and ex-Boca Juniors striker Dario Benedetto. The former Porto, Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur coach has rebuilt his own reputation by reviving a club that is wildly popular across France and remains the country’s only winners of the Champions League having taken the inaugural edition in 1993.

Now, a decade after they last won Ligue 1, they are heading back to Europe’s top table, but their ability to compete with the continent’s best is in doubt because of their financial situation, and there is uncertainty surrounding Villas-Boas’s future as a result. “I am very happy in Marseille. I don’t want to look for another club. I don’t want to go back to the Premier League,” the 42-year-old told RMC radio from his native Portugal,

where he has been spending lockdown. “I obviously want to go into the Champions League with Marseille, but...if the conditions are not there for us to do a good job, I don’t think it’s worth it.”

UEFA sanctions loom

Spending since American tycoon Frank McCourt - the former Los Angeles Dodgers owner - bought the club in 2016 has been way beyond the limits set out in UEFA’s Financial Fair Play rules. They lost 91 million euros (\$98m) last season and that will be compounded by further losses this season, made worse by the coronavirus crisis. UEFA announced in March that Marseille had been referred to the adjudicatory chamber of their Club Financial Control Body for not complying with an agreement to balance their books. The club had already signed a “settlement agreement” which set out that Marseille would have to play with a reduced squad in their next European campaign and pay back up to

four million euros of any prize money.

Now further sanctions are inevitable, with sports daily L’Equipe suggesting they could even be excluded from the next Champions League. “When I bought OM, I knew there would be highs and lows,” said McCourt recently, emphasizing his “long-term vision”. With a wage bill last season of 127 million euros, Marseille must sell players, and want those who remain to accept pay cuts. Villas-Boas says he needs a competitive team if he is to stay.

He also wants to be sure sporting director Andoni Zubizarreta, the ex-Barcelona and Spain goalkeeper, stays before committing to a second season at the Velodrome, even if he is settled on France’s Mediterranean coast. “I want to understand more or less where we are going, how much we can invest. Whether the club wants me, or if they don’t, in which case it will not be a problem,” said Villas-Boas, who is due back in France next week. — AFP

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Their temperatures were then taken and once an individual, one hour training session was completed, they departed in a similar manner. While the United Soccer League - which is effectively the second tier in the United States - had already introduced ‘non-contact training in small groups,’ MLS are moving forward with extreme caution. “We split the group into two segments and split the field into four,” said McDonough who has been in constant contact with Beckham via Zoom.

“There were two entry points to the fields and a trainer in PPE would come to the car, take their temperature, sanitize their hands and then the players would then put on a face mask and go to their assigned quadrant in the facility. “We funneled them all through,



WASHINGTON: A detailed view of a MLS soccer ball at Audi Field in Washington, DC. Major League Soccer players will return to team training facilities for individual outdoor workouts in areas where governments have eased coronavirus pandemic precautions to allow such practices. — AFP

they did their work and the coaches were present while respecting social distancing barriers. “No player was allowed in our building.” There have been more than 38,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Florida with just over 1,500 deaths, according to statistics released on Wednesday.

“The players have found the last seven weeks very difficult,” said McDonough who stressed squad members wouldn’t be in every day and would continue to supplement their training schedules at home. “The parks have been closed and there was nowhere to work out but as soon as the parks started opening, we thought about everything because if they are in a park, you can’t protect them from people coming up to them and recognizing them and wanting selfies. “So we know we have great facilities and can put them in here in a protected environment while social distancing to keep them safe.” MLS commissioner Don Garber has not set a firm date to return although the lack of action hasn’t stopped Beckham’s team from being linked to the kind of superstar signings the fans are desperate for. Real Madrid’s Gareth Bale and Barcelona’s Chilean midfielder Arturo Vidal have both been mentioned recently as potential targets for the club, which is in its debut season after an agonizing string of setbacks to former England star Beckham’s bid to get an MLS team off the ground. — AFP

German league to restart on May 15

BERLIN: The Bundesliga will resume on May 15, the German league confirmed Wednesday, after Chancellor Angela Merkel and state leaders gave the green light to restart behind closed doors following weeks of shutdown imposed to control the spread of the coronavirus. The German Football League (DFL) confirmed the restart date to AFP subsidiary SID on Wednesday night.

“After weighing up all the arguments, the DFL Executive Committee decided today... to resume play in the Bundesliga and 2nd Bundesliga from 15 May 2020,” the DFL said in a statement to magazine Kicker. Germany’s top-flight will become the first of Europe’s major leagues to return to the field. “Matches will be allowed under the approved rules,” said Merkel at a press conference in Berlin. Germany’s top politicians approved a plan for the Bundesliga to resume in stadiums without spectators and with players regularly tested.

Permission was granted on condition that strict guidelines are followed—with a hygiene officer appointed to each team to prevent contagion of the virus. Bayern Munich and Germany captain Manuel Neuer said the players now had an “enormous responsibility” to be role models and follow the hygiene guidelines. Representatives from the 36 clubs in the country’s top two divisions will finalize details in a videoconference on Thursday.

“Today’s decision is good news for the Bundesliga,” said the league’s CEO Christian Seifert. “It’s a great responsibility for the clubs to implement the medical and organizational guidelines in a disciplined manner.” Bayern Munich, seeking their eighth consecutive German title, were four points clear at the top of the table when play was halted in mid-March.

“It’s a good feeling. We are now looking forward to being able to resume playing,” said Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, adding the decision was “an important and wonderful signal for the Bundesliga”. — AFP



INCHEON: People walk past banners depicting spectators in the stands prior to South Korea's new baseball season opening game between SK Wyverns and Hanwha Eagles in Incheon. — AFP

South Korea reboots COVID-19-hit football

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