



12 Coronavirus lockdowns may spark rise in HIV infections



16 In one Beirut hospital, COVID warriors through their own eyes



19 Like death: 'Thrilla in Manila' changed Ali, Frazier forever



Ramadan KAREEM

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Kuwait reports 10 deaths, 991 new virus infections

Assembly session could be postponed • Audit Bureau asked to review spending

Stranded Indians finally accepted under amnesty

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The plight of around 80 Indians living on the streets for nearly two weeks in Farwaniya after failing to register for the government

amnesty finally ended on Monday, after they were accepted under the amnesty and taken to a shelter for repatriation back home. A volunteer working with a charity group that distributes meals to needy people had posted about their suffering on social media. Kuwait Times had also contacted the interior ministry to take action in this regard, while another Indian group also tried to help.

Their reasons for not registering for the amnesty were varied - some didn't have passports, others didn't meet the condition of expired visas before March 1, 2020, some had debts to

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KUWAIT: Indians who were living on the streets are moved to a shelter in Abdaly on Monday.

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The ministry of health announced yesterday that the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) claimed the lives of 10 more people in the past 24 hours, raising the death toll to 75. In his daily coronavirus update, Health Ministry Spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said 991 more people tested positive for the highly contagious virus, increasing the overall number of infections in the country to 10,277. He pointed out that 158 patients are in intensive care, including 74 in critical condition.

The new cases include 300 Indians, 222 Egyptians, 138 Kuwaitis, 118 Bangladeshis and the rest of other nationalities. Farwaniya governorate recorded 356 cases, Ahmadi 237 cases, Hawally 219, Capital governorate 116 cases and Jahra 63. Earlier, the health ministry announced the recovery of 194 COVID-19 patients, bringing the total to 3,101 recoveries.

The National Assembly's emergency session scheduled for tomorrow appears to be headed for postponement after the prime minister and the Council of Ministers requested the Assembly to delay the session until after May 30 due to health considerations. Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said yesterday the Assembly bureau will review the government's request later yesterday and will decide whether to go ahead with the session or delay it.

The Cabinet said in a statement after its virtual meeting yesterday that health authorities have concluded that holding the session with more than 100 people present in the chamber may not be safe. But MP Mohammad Al-Dallal regretted that the government has asked for the postponement, saying MPs realize the importance of the health situation but the supervisory role of the Assembly at this time is crucial and must be activated. He called on the government to review its request and stressed that the session



should go ahead.

The session comes amid concerns and questions raised by lawmakers and activists over spending by the government during the coronavirus crisis, which amounted to KD 686 million between March 12 and May 9, according to the latest report of the Audit Bureau. About 37 percent of the contracts signed during the period belong to the health ministry at a cost of KD 206 million. Other contracts belong to a large number of ministries and are not directly linked to the coronavirus crisis.

A statement by the Cabinet issued yesterday following a virtual meeting said the Audit Bureau has been asked to review and study all direct contracts made in connection with the coronavirus since the start of March. It also called on all citizens to perform

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Indian trains to roll amid surge in virus cases

NEW DELHI: India's enormous railway network was grinding back to life yesterday as a gradual lifting of the world's biggest coronavirus lockdown gathered pace even as new cases surged. The country of 1.3 billion imposed a strict shutdown in late March, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has credited with keeping cases to a modest 70,000, with around 2,000 deaths.

But the lockdown, which enters its 50th day tomorrow, has torpedoed the economy, snatching the livelihoods of tens of millions of people and hitting the poor the hard-

est. Whole industries have been devastated and there are fears of food shortages, while a ban on flights has left hundreds of thousands of Indians stranded abroad. Restrictions have been steadily eased, however, particularly in rural areas, and some Indian trains - on a network which normally carries over 20 million passengers a day - were scheduled to resume yesterday.

More than 54,000 tickets for an initial 30 services sold out online within three hours on Monday, reports said. The first train was to leave New Delhi at 4:00 pm (10:30 GMT), followed by others from Kolkata, Bangalore and Mumbai. The government has not set out a program for when more services will resume. There were limited special services laid on after the lockdown was imposed to ferry home some of the millions of poor migrant workers left jobless and destitute by the shutdown. Many people, however, were forced to walk

hundreds of kilometers to get home.

Passengers for yesterday's mostly inter-city services were told to arrive at stations 90 minutes before departure for health screening, and to bring their own food for the journey. Ajay Dewani, a photographer stranded in Ghaziabad with a ticket for Chattisgarh state said he walked for four hours to get to Delhi station. "I haven't been paid for two months and my landlord was hassling us for rent," he told AFP, carrying a backpack and pulling a wheeled suitcase.

Usha, a labourer from Madhya Pradesh state, said she and husband and their two children walked for two days to get to the station, only to be turned away because they had no ticket. "We came here to the railway station as we were told that the trains will start working from May 12," she told AFP. "Where do we go now? We have no money to buy something to eat."

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MUMBAI: Migrant workers gather outside Dharavi slum to board a bus to take them to the railway terminus for boarding a special train back home during a nationwide lockdown yesterday. — AFP

Zinc-HCQ found effective in some COVID patients

WASHINGTON: The antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine has shown mixed results against the coronavirus in early studies, but a new paper out of New York suggests combining it with the dietary supplement zinc sulfate could create a more effective treatment.

The research by the NYU Grossman School of Medicine was posted on a medical preprint site on Monday, meaning it hasn't yet been peer reviewed. Records of about 900 COVID-19

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Burj turned into charity box: Gulf cases pass 100K

DUBAI: The world's tallest building, Dubai's 828-metre Burj Khalifa, has become a glowing charity donation box, raising money for food for United Arab Emirates residents suffering the economic impact of the new coronavirus pandemic. Each of the tower's 1.2 million external lights was 'sold' for 10 dirhams (\$2.70), enough to buy one meal. As donations came in, the tower 'filled up', and people could also bid to claim the light at the very top.

As the region's tourism and business hub with the world's busiest international airport, Dubai's economy has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. Many people have lost jobs

or had incomes reduced. Tens of thousands of migrant workers, who often live in crowded shared accommodation where the virus spreads more easily, have registered to be repatriated.

"Hope you have a good solid meal. We take things for granted but life has a way of teaching us how to wake up," said donor Shereen Harris in a public comment on the campaign's website. The UAE has recorded 19,661 cases of infection with COVID-19 and 203 deaths, the second highest death toll after Saudi Arabia of the six Gulf states.

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DUBAI: A handout image made available yesterday shows Burj Khalifa during a light show to mark the '10 million meals' COVID-19 campaign. — AFP

Pandemic Diaries

Walk a mile in
their shoes

By Jamie Etheridge

etheridge@kuwaittimes.com

The air felt fresh and clean yesterday when we left our apartment and went outside to walk during the two hours allotted for exercise under the full curfew. A handful of people, all safely distanced from each other and most wearing masks, strolled along the street. Birds chirped and a few stray cats slunk along the sidewalks and behind the wheels of parked cars.

Our daughters, outside for the first time in more than two months, laughed and joked, excited and happy just to be outdoors for a few minutes. It felt wonderful to be outside, to walk in the sunshine and feel the slight breeze on our bare faces.

We walked for half an hour, circling our block and keeping as much as possible to the shaded areas on the streets. Along the main street, the road grew busy as dozens of walkers and joggers passed by. Most wore masks and thankfully there was still enough space that everyone kept a distance from each other. We are incredibly lucky to live in an area that is not overcrowded.

Many people in Kuwait, however, are not so lucky. They live in densely populated areas with narrow streets crammed with parked cars, no sidewalks and no gardens or walkways. Videos and photos from Khaitan, Salmiya, Farwaniya, Jleeb and other areas showed closely-packed crowds (most of whom were men) walking almost side by side through the streets. Some of them were wearing masks but many were not. There were fights on the streets between knots of 'exercisers'; others exploited the outdoor hours to dash to the grocery store for supplies, people driving cars and even riding bicycles against the Cabinet's directive.

The full curfew completed its third day only and already people are feeling the intense pressure of the lockdown. The outdoor exercise hours are meant as a time to allow people to maintain their physical and mental health, offering an important break from the feeling of being trapped indoors. No one wants to lose the freedom of these two precious hours.

But for those who live in a crowded area with no park or walking path, with tens of thousands of others stacked on top of each other in tiny apartments, what other option do they have?

It's easy to judge those people walking crowded areas and the comments on social media illustrated the harsh lack of empathy. But in these times of global crisis, what's needed is more empathy. Instead of judging or criticizing those who were out walking, people need to try walking a mile in each other's shoes.

Full curfew expected to help reduce
COVID-19 cases: Health Minister

KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs a cabinet meeting via video call. — KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Government urged the public Monday to abide by the full curfew and comply with health authorities' instructions as the curfew was expected to reduce the number of coronavirus cases. Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah, in an online briefing for the cabinet, chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, said number of infections amongst citizens and expatriates increased due to failure of the public to abide by physical distancing. Sheikh Basel however said the health situation was under control and "the number of infections is expected to decline after the implementation of the full curfew in the country," a statement by Deputy Premier, Interior Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh said. The full curfew began Sunday and the government allowed the people to exercise outdoors for two hours daily: 4:30-6:30 pm.

Sheikh Basel, meanwhile, said the Ministry of Health filed three lawsuits against persons who attempted to undermine reputation of the MoH and its staff regarding alleged corruption and profiteering crimes related to purchase of masks and protective garments, said Saleh. Sheikh Basel reiterated full confidence in the MoH officials who were "carrying out their responsibilities faithfully and in integrity."

Examining procedures

Saleh said the cabinet, keen on brushing aside any claim, assigned the State Audit Bureau to examine direct contracting procedures carried out by the MoH, as of March 1, 2020, in order to confront ramifications of the coronavirus. The government urged the public to come forward to legal departments and anti-corruption authority to provide information and documents proving commitment of corruption crimes. It also assigned relevant government authorities to take legal action against any person publishing false allegations against integrity of officials, said Saleh.

Precautions

Kuwait halted all commercial flights until further notice, and has sent special flights to repatriate Kuwaitis back home from countries affected with the virus' spread. Kuwait took all measures to test Kuwaitis repatriated from infected areas for potential infection. Kuwait had required all expatriates who arrived from travel on March 1 and beyond to visit Kuwait International Fairground where the Ministry of Health has set up a center to test people for possible infection. Meanwhile, the Cabinet announced on April 9 the operation of all airline flights for expats who are wishing to return back to their countries. Authorities also announced a public holiday in the country from March 12 to May 28, with work resuming on May 31, while entities providing vital services will remain open. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has suspended classes for March at all public and private schools (for both students and teaching staffs); first from March 1 to March 12, and later extended it until March 29, before eventually suspending schools until August for grade 12 and October for other stages. State departments have been on high alert to take precautions against the potential spread of the virus. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has taken measures to make sure that facial masks, hand sanitizers and other goods remain accessible to the public.

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

On the other hand, Minister of Oil and Acting Minister of Electricity and Water Dr Khaled Al-Fadhel and MEW's officials briefed the cabinet members that 13,340 megawatts of electricity would be generated this month, a three-percent increase than the 2019 figures. In the meantime, Foreign Minister and head of a special team tasked with repatriation of citizens from abroad, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah, briefed the government about preparations for nationals' return from Saudi Arabia via the land checkpoint Al-Nuwiseeb were complete. He said the operation would be carried out between May 12 and 20, and the foreign ministry and the State of Kuwait Embassy in Riyadh started registering names of citizens seeking to return home. He expressed gratitude for Saudi Arabia for facilitating the return of Kuwaiti citizens.

13,340
megawatts
enter service

Amir's speech

The cabinet also discussed speech of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, which he addressed to the nation two days ago, during which he urged the international community and specialists to search for a vaccine for the coronavirus pandemic. His Highness the Amir highlighted the professional and transparent way the government was dealing with the pandemic, thanking all those who were fighting the disease. His Highness the Amir also called for learning lessons to strengthen national unity, rationalize resources, lessen dependence on others and diversify income. The cabinet assigned relevant ministerial committees to implement guidelines in the speech.

The cabinet meanwhile urged the parliament to postpone a National Assembly's session, scheduled for today, until after May 30, the last day of the full curfew. The government said the scheduled session entailed health hazards because the parliament would house more than 100 people in one place, which would contradict with preventive measures to confront the virus. — KUNA

In My View

Corona sets
the rules

By Abdellatif Sharaa

local@kuwaittimes.com

Allow me first, during the last 10 days of the holy month of Ramadan, the most blessed period of the month, to wish everyone all the best. Please dear readers of all faiths - do pray day and night that Allah (God) Almighty accept our worship and clean our world from the so-called COVID-19 pandemic.

We went to bed one night, then without warning we woke up in a different world that was almost turned upside down. Europe, all of a sudden, is no longer the dream destination of migrants, the United States is no longer the strongest, Paris is no longer a romantic hub, New York is no longer exciting, the Great Wall of China is no longer a fort! Makkah and Madinah lost worshippers, mosques are empty, churches closed their doors. All became afraid of death. Everyone realized their true size as there is no value of human beings on the face of earth.

Suddenly, many wars stopped and both the killer and the killed became hunted by a virus that can only be seen with compound microscopes. Suddenly, shaking hands, hugging and kissing became weapons we fear. The lack of visits by parents, family and friends became a symbol of love.

Suddenly we realized that there is no true value of power, beauty, money and weapons, and our major concern is to get oxygen and make sure it is available in case we become prey to the virus. All life's facilities came to a halt - no airports, schools, universities or restaurants.

The world became cleaner, the environment improved. The ozone layer stopped deteriorating, wildlife became relatively vibrant in urban areas while human beings are quarantined in homes that all of a sudden became virtual prisons of choice. This is a message from the heavens, that earth, water, skies and air are safe without you; the world is going on without you. When you return to a guest life again, do not forget that you are just a guest in this world.

Finally: "Oh Allah, grant health to my body, Oh Allah, grant health to my hearing, Oh Allah, grant health to my sight, Oh Allah, I ask You by Your mercy which envelops all things, that You forgive me, there is no might nor power except with Allah."

PS: The idea of this column was inspired by a message from a friend

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has recorded 9,286 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as of Monday, in addition to 65 deaths. With the exception of 131 cases in intensive care, all infected cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while hundreds have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 2,907 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, while there are 6,314 people receiving treatment and 2,619 quarantined.

Curfew

Kuwait imposed a total curfew from May 10 to May 30, allowing room for people to walk out for daily exercise between 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm, and to shop at co-ops and supermarkets once every six days during the curfew hours by making an appointment through www.moci.shop. Earlier, Kuwait enforced a country-wide partial curfew from 5:00 pm to 6:00 am, which was later extended to start from 4:00 pm until 8:00 am during Ramadan, while allowing restaurants and food stores to make home deliveries from 5:00 pm until 1:00 am. The government also locked down Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh in a bid to contain the spread of the virus and enable health workers to test inhabitants. Earlier, the government decided to close all shopping malls, beauty salons and barber shops as part of its measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The government also allowed supermarkets, restaurants and shops to host a maximum of five people at a time and in case there are lines, the distance must be at least one meter between people. The Ministry of Commerce launched a website (www.moci.shop) to enable people to book appointments to shop at co-operative societies in their areas. The Public Authority for Industry also announced that companies can apply to evacuate their workers from Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula. To do so, they must fill a 'workers evacuation form' available on www.pai.gov.kw, and send the form via email to: Jasiri@moh.gov.kw.

Hotlines

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

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

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

Medicine delivery

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

- Amiri Hospital: 50880699
- Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital: 50880755
- Farwaniya Hospital: 50880852
- Adan Hospital: 50880908
- Jahra Hospital: 50881066
- Sabah Hospital: 97632660
- Jaber Hospital: 96992079
- Ibn Sina Hospital: 99613948
- Chest Hospital: 99258749
- Razi Hospital: 97633487
- Kuwait Cancer Control Center: 96735242
- Psychiatric Hospital: 97350113
- Physiotherapy Hospital: 99824037

- Maternity Hospital: 98559531
- As'ad Al-Hamad Dermatology Center: 98514508
- Zain Hospital: 97552031
- NBK Hospital: 96931761
- Al-Rashed Allergy Hospital: 94162470
- Infectious Diseases Hospital: 96989164
- Palliative Care Hospital: 94024786
- Sabah Al-Ahmad Urology Center: 90952469
- KFH Addiction Treatment Center: 94169363

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

Mental health assistance

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

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

Local

IN MY VIEW

COVID-19 and the hidden face of idolatry



By Nejouad Al-Yagout

local@kuwaittimes.com

We hear it often: COVID-19 knows no nationality. And yes that is true. It doesn't. But we do. We not only know nationality, we know nationalism. Both locals and expatriates are getting infected, but all we hear is how the latter are the cause. We forget to take into account the ratio of foreigners to locals and the living spaces of both. We also forget to take into account the fact that both citizens and non-citizens are flouting regulations, secretly and openly.

We also hear: COVID-19 does not differentiate between the rich and poor. And, again, it doesn't. But we do. This pandemic has infected politicians, celebrities, millionaires and royals. But still: How many times have we heard that it is low income workers who are to blame for the spread of the disease? How often do we ignore the tragic fact that low income workers are at much greater risk of exposure because of unfortunate circumstances? They are crammed into apartments, cannot afford not to go to work, and their responsibilities entail mixing in crowds and interacting with many. They are on the front-lines, but nobody considers them heroes. In fact, we see them as a burden—something we need to rid our country of, now and when this is over.

This underlying mistrust of the so-called 'other' is a phenomenon that is prevalent all over the world. It is not just happening in our country. In fact, in some other nations, we hear news of individuals who are being assaulted because they are told they brought the disease to the countries in question. Though minorities were assaulted and derided prior to this pandemic, COVID-19 has made our voices louder, here and everywhere. Because now we have a reason to close borders and get rid of minorities. Because now we have a reason to implement our nationalistic ideals in the face of a perceived threat. Because now we have a reason to blame foreigners for not only our health issues but financial hardships and social woes.

Many experts are predicting unpleasant scenarios of unrest when this is over; when we begin to assess the economic fallout and trauma. We failed at uniting in the face of a common threat, so we can only envision that people will continue to point fingers. And the scapegoats, as modern-day theorists and the tragic chapters of our collective history remind us, will be minorities. If we do not shed our prejudices, a more virulent form of nationalism than the one we see now will come to life. This mutated nationalism will give leaders further justification to expel as many immigrants as possible and implement harsher laws for those seeking entry.

And, in our country, as ever, we will turn a blind eye to employers who postpone the payment of basic salaries to their employees. We will forgive those who engage in human trafficking; we will protect the powerful ones who exploit migrant workers who came here only to find they have no jobs—after giving their life savings, or money they borrowed from loan sharks, to someone who has the law on his side. We will offer to send illegal immigrants home, under the pretext of amnesty, to "purge" our country of the workers who we exploited in the first place; and we will continue to applaud and vote for leaders whose anti-expatriate rhetoric resonates with the prejudices that lurk within us.

God-willing, this is not the case. Perhaps we will realize that we are headed for destruction and thwart it by speaking on behalf of our fellow human beings or refusing to be a part of this cult of divisiveness. Maybe we can remember it is our religious duty to help "...the poor, the traveler, and the one who asks" (Quran 2:177). And perhaps we can remember that "...God forbids immorality, injustice, oppression" (Quran 16:90).

When we worship our country, we are committing idolatry. Nationalism is a form of idolatry. Yes, it is awe-inspiring to respect the laws, to love our country, and to protect it; but not when it is at the expense of non-citizens. This is when we must refrain from worshipping our nationalistic identity to following God, who "...loves those who act justly" (Quran 60:8). And it is unjust to treat others with contempt. It is unjust to make others feel inferior. Allah states that He created "nations and tribes [so we may] know one another" (Quran 49:13). How can we know each other when we drive each other away? How can we know each other when we divide our nation into us vs them?

In this sacred month of Ramadan, may we remember that not only does COVID-19 know no nationality nor social status, but we don't either. May God guide us to the ways of inclusivity and harmony, so that we become known for our hospitality and humility. May we stand united as we navigate unknown terrain. And may we remember that we were "...created from one soul" (Quran 4:1; Quran 7:189). Allahuma ameen.

(Side-note: And, for now, maybe, just maybe, COVID-19 has to stick around much longer than we anticipated in order to give us the time we surely need to awaken from our stupor of separation).

People conserve as total curfew makes it difficult to secure needs

Residents concerned after seeing baqalas closed during 'exercise' period



KUWAIT: Shops are closed at the Mubarakiya Market in Kuwait City during the 20-day nationwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on May 11, 2020. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



A cat lingers in front of covered stalls in Kuwait City.

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: During the total lockdown, people are stuck with family, friends and even alone for 22 hours, and only allowed to walk and breathe the fresh air from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm. "I bought some food good for a few days. I don't know if it would even last for 20 days. I have canned food, some whole chickens and some fresh and frozen veggies, knowing that we will be at home for some time," said June, a resident of Salmiya block 9.

"One thing is for sure. If I don't buy food in the next few days, the stocks will be over. I don't want to buy anything until the curfew is over, but I have two kids. I will cook just enough for us so it can last a few days," she said. "On the first day of lockdown at 4:30 pm, I went around my neighborhood to see if baqalas were open; unfortunately they were all closed, so I am very concerned now," she said, referring to the period in which walking exercise is allowed daily.

The problem is compounded for those under lockdown for many weeks in Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh. Janet, an assistant teacher in an English school in Kuwait, lives with her three fellow teachers in Mahboula, with very limited stocks in their fridge.

Double lockdown

"We are used to the lockdown, but this is a double lockdown for us. We are surviving because our embassy is providing us with some supplies. For the next 20 days, we only have three whole chickens left, a few cans of food, and thank God 10 kg of rice. We will try to use our few remaining supplies slowly till



Unpaid workers survive on handouts

the end of the month," she said. "Maybe we will cook less and less every day. We need to survive these trying times and we hope everything will be fine."

Janet also expects food supplies will be added more to deliveries to people who are in the lockdown areas for weeks. "We have been suffering for long,

They are distributing food, but supplies are not enough for many; that is why you see the long queue of people when they are distributing food, because they all want something. We Filipinos don't queue because we know it's not even enough for the people waiting in the long queue every day. There is also the possibility you will get the coronavirus in the queue since there is no social distancing," she said.

Vijay, an Indian restaurant worker, has not been paid since March. He said he is surviving with the support of his friends. He is a "bachelor" and has been living with a Filipino family in a flat in Salmiya. "I am surviving because of friends who are supplying some food for weeks. I only eat whatever is given to me as I have no more money," he said.

Kuwait has offered a grocery shopping service during curfew, which can be accessed by making an appointment online at www.moci.shop to shop at co-operative societies or supermarkets located in the shopper's same area of residence. An appointment can be made once every six days for a 30-minute shopping period. The government had reassured the public that supplies at local markets were efficient to meet demand during the curfew period which lasts until May 30.



A view shows a deserted playground near Kuwait Towers during the lockdown in Kuwait City.



A view shows boats moored at the marina of Souq Sharq mall during lockdown.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

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Kuwait Heritage



KUWAIT: Cafés and their patron in the early 1960s. The picture shows a group of popular cafés lined up inside the market near the Safat Square. Old Cadillac cars are seen parked next to the cafés. (Source: Collection of Ali Al Rais, Center of Research and Studies on Kuwait, 2017. Researched by Mohammed Zakaria Abu El-Ella, Researcher in Heritage, the Ministry of Information)

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The Three Parts of Ramadan

Ramadan is said to be split into three thirds: the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has said, "It (Ramadan) is the month whose beginning is mercy, middle, forgiveness and its end emancipation from the fire" (Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 93). Salman Al-Farisi (RA) reported that Prophet Muhammad (BBUH) said, "...The first third of the month of Ramadan is the time for mercy, the second third is for forgiveness, the third is for release from Hellfire..." (Ibn Khuzaymah). We hope to make the most of each third so that we can receive the blessing related to each.

For the first third of mercy, the following hadith comes to mind: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "While fasting remember the hunger and thirst on the Day of Judgment. Give alms to the poor and needy. Pay respect to your elders, have sympathy for your youngsters and be kind towards your relatives and kinsmen. Guard your tongue against unworthy words, and your eyes from scenes that are not worth seeing and your ears from sounds that should not be heard. Be kind to orphans so that if your children may become orphans they will also be treated with kindness."

The second third of Ramadan is characterized as a time when Allah (SWT)'s forgives. The Quran says, "And hasten to forgiveness from your Lord, and a Garden the extensiveness of which is the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who guard against evil. ~ Quran 3:132.

Will they not turn to Allah and seek His forgiveness, and Allah is oft-forgiving, Merciful (Quran 5:74).

A prophetic tradition reported by Abu Huraira (RA) says, "Whoever observes fasts during the month of Ramadan out of sincere faith, and hoping to attain Allah's rewards, then all his past sins will be forgiven." ~ Bukhari 2: 37.

The third portion of Ramadan is considered to be a time for seeking release from the hellfire. Abu Said Al

Khudri (RA) said, "Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said Allah frees some people from hellfire every day and night - meaning of Ramadan - and every Muslim has an answered supplication every day and night [of Ramadan]. (Reported by Al Bazar and authenticated by Sheikh Albaani in Saheeh Targheeb No. 1002). This is also the part of the month that Lailat-ul-Qadr falls in. The Quran describes this special night:

"Verily! We have sent it (this Quran) down in the night of Al-Qadr. And what will make you know what the night of Al-Qadr is? The night of Al-Qadr is better than a thousand months! Therein descend the angels and the Ruh (Gabriel) by Allah's Permission with all Decrees. Peace! until the appearance of dawn. (Quran 97:1-5)

It is sunnah to spend some time in seclusion (itikaf) for a spiritual retreat in the mosque during the last third of Ramadan. 'Aishah (RA) narrated that "The Prophet (peace be upon him) used to do a retreat in the mosque during the last ten nights of Ramadan until he died. His wives continued to observe this practice after his death." (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

While fasting for a whole month may seem like a lot, it becomes easier when it is divided into three parts, as above, or even into 30 separate days. If we fast one day at a time, or one third at a time until we complete the entire month, it will seem easier. The benefits of each third are so worthwhile, that nobody who is aware of them can purposefully forfeit them. Wishing all our readers the benefits of Ramadan - mercy, forgiveness, and release from Hellfire.

• Courtesy of the TIES Center, whose mission is to empower Kuwait's expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society, and to facilitate opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, please call 25231015/6 or e-mail: info@tiescenter.net.

Kuwait backs Saudi for balancing oil market

KUWAIT: Minister of Oil and Acting Minister of Electricity and Water Dr Khaled Al-Fadhel on Monday affirmed the State of Kuwait's support for Saudi Arabia for restoring balance to the oil market. The minister applauded the existing coordination between the State of Kuwait and the Kingdom. Kuwait will cut its crude output, voluntarily, by 80,000 barrels per day in June, in addition to the proclaimed cut of its output quota that had been agreed upon according to the OPEC-OPECplus deal. Energy ministers of the OPEC members and partners (OPEC+ group) agreed, in April, to cut the daily oil output by 9.7 million barrels per day from May 1 to June 30, and by 7.7 mb/d for six months starting from July 1. The 10th (Extraordinary) OPEC and non-OPEC Ministerial Meeting, held via videoconference under the Chairmanship of Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz Bin Salman, also approved a reduction by 5.8 mb/d for the subsequent 16 months. —KUNA

Preparations for repatriating Kuwaitis by land complete

KUWAIT: The Foreign Minister and head of a special team tasked with repatriation of citizens from abroad, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, announced on Monday that preparations for nationals' return from Saudi Arabia via the land checkpoint Al-Nuwayseeb were complete. He said in a statement that the operation would be carried out between May 12 and 20, adding that the foreign ministry and the State of Kuwait Embassy in Riyadh started registering names of citizens seeking to return home. All returnees will be subjected to medical examination at the Khairan Resort. Kuwait had already completed a multi phased operation bringing back home by air nearly 30,000 nationals who were stranded in several countries amid the ongoing coronavirus crisis. —KUNA

Local

In midst of pandemic, one team is staying far from home to help keep lights on in Kuwait

Team logged more than 7,000 work hours in less than a month

KUWAIT: For now, Abdulsattar Mohammed can't go home. The mechanical field engineer is living in a hotel room in Kuwait where, like so many people, he is sheltering in place and helping to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus that has swept the globe. In between remotely supporting colleagues on other outages — not only in Kuwait but across Africa, India and the Middle East — Mohammed spends his days praying and working out in the hallways. When he's hungry, he orders food from the hotel restaurant or takeout. And every day he gets on a video call with his wife and two sons back in the United Arab Emirates, where the oldest child is just learning how to read.

Mohammed made the choice to stay away from home. In early February, he and a group of other engineers and expert technicians from the Middle East, Asia, Europe and Africa headed to Kuwait to do regular maintenance on two power plants that GE operates in the country. They were meant to be home within six weeks. But as the COVID-19 pandemic picked up in the Middle East, they had a small window in mid-March where they all could have returned home. However, the work they had flown in to execute in Kuwait was still in progress so instead, they decided to stay to help keep the lights on in this country of 4 million.

The team is part of FieldCore, GE's field services maintenance teams that work on equipment at power plants around the world. In mid-March as Kuwait was shutting down, Ibrahim Zein, service manager for Kuwait and Qatar at FieldCore, and GE Gas Power's team of three contract performance managers (CPMs) — Abdulla Alshalabi, Mohamed Abulfetoh and Djamel Bouhali — faced a difficult decision.

The men were in a sense the "field commanders." As service manager, Zein was ultimately responsible for the FieldCore team and their activities on the ground. The CPMs are the local

experts on the ground in Kuwait, GE's primary point of contact with its customers, responsible for ensuring that customer requirements are met. They work hand in hand with FieldCore: Helping to plan activities on the ground; liaising with the power plant owners and operators; assisting with obtaining permits and visas for the movement of tools, equipment and people; and other activities so that various services can be executed safely and on time.

Should they try and get the crew out of the country and risk Kuwait being without essential electricity supplies right at the onset of the summer months when temperatures routinely exceed 110 degrees Fahrenheit (44 C) and power demand is at its peak? Or could they ask the workers to stay, isolating them far from their loved ones for who knew how long?

Opportunity to leave

So they gave the team a choice. "You have an opportunity to leave," Zein told them. All of them opted to stay and continue servicing customers alongside another group of FieldCore employees who had already been in the country prior to travel restrictions being introduced.

As the weeks went by, the team did not just execute the services they had originally planned to work on at the two power plants but also took on other plans, as well as emergency service, and work across another two sites. "We were determined to help our customers because we knew other experts couldn't fly into the country to take on these jobs," says Zein.

In less than a month, the men have logged more than 7,000 work hours. "If we did not have these people in the country, we could have up to 1,500 megawatts down, which is 10 percent to 15 percent of the power in Kuwait," Zein says. In all, GE-built technologies can generate over 40 percent of Kuwait's electricity and GE's teams help to service and maintain this equipment.

The engineers sometimes had to

learn on the job. For example, during routine maintenance the field team would normally shut down power generation equipment such as gas or steam turbines and generators, inspect and service the equipment, update software and run diagnostic tests to ensure the plant was operating properly. Then, they'd turn the project over to a separate 3-person team of commissioning engineers, who would bring the equipment back online.

But that commissioning team couldn't make it to the plants, so the field engineers stuck in Kuwait had to do their jobs as well. Typically, one commissioning engineer would monitor the software and readouts. A second would check the turbines, the motors and the valves, calibrating them and making sure everything worked correctly. Finally, an emissions engineer would set up tools to measure the plant emissions to ensure compliance with local regulations and confirm the plant was operating as it should. Now, the commissioning work fell to the field engineers working via phone and video calls with colleagues outside Kuwait.

Although the team is now mostly confined to their hotels, they are still doing what they can, working remotely with the skeleton crews at electricity plants around Kuwait to help them monitor and repair any issues that come up.

Act of camaraderie

But it was not only on the frontline that the solidarity of team members was evident. When the Egyptian-born FieldCore engineer Mohamed Khedr was confined to his hotel room because of the lockdown, he was dismayed that he would be unable to stick to his daily exercise regime — a habit he had developed more than a decade-and-a-half ago. Even the hotel gym was a restricted area. But when his GE Gas Power colleague Abdulla Alshalabi, a resident in Kuwait, heard about Khedr's plight, he quickly arranged for a set of dumbbells to be

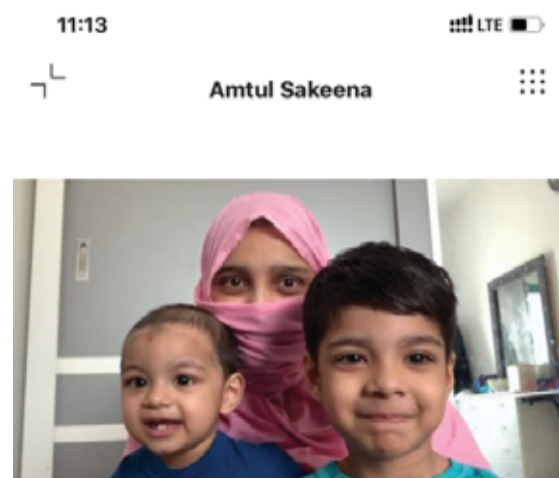


Ibrahim Zein

delivered to the hotel. This act of camaraderie allowed Khedr to keep some form of exercise routine in between video calls with his family and offering remote assistance to other sites where field teams were still engaged in outages.

Prior to the lockdown, Khedr managed eight startups since Feb 28 until his hotel confinement on March 29. During that period, he was responsible for testing and verifying valve calibrations and monitoring crucial signals to ensure the units could be started up safely within the prescribed manufacturing parameters and handed over to the customers with zero defects. Khedr explained that the "intensity of the work" was unusual. He recalled an incident where he was summoned to a site around midday to conduct a tuning. However, the job that could normally take up to 12 hours had to be completed before the 5 p.m. curfew. He handed over the unit to the customer team in 4 hours, 20 minutes after starting the job — with barely enough time to make the 30-minute journey back to his hotel.

"At this point, it's not clear what will happen next," Zein says. "We don't know when the airports will officially open. It's a difficult situation but we are extremely proud of our team members on the ground, who are more than willing to face any challenge."



Abdulsattar Mohammed talks to his family via video call.

News in brief

Random testing in two areas

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health announced conducting random testing in Khaldiya and Adailiya during the curfew period overnight. The testing started Monday and continued yesterday from 9 pm until 1 am.

Corporate registration

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior has decided to scrap companies' appointments at the General Department of Residency due to the nationwide total curfew, but to keep its online corporate registration service. The code of e-services will be available on the ministry's website, the ministry said in a press statement. In case of failed registration, the ministry could be reached via the following website: moi.gov.kw@kesupport, it added.

Hotels handover

KUWAIT: The Finance Ministry has ended contracts with four hotels out of 20 that were used as institutional health quarantines for citizens arriving from abroad, as the required time for quarantine was completed. The Ministry of Health will hand over quarantine places gradually. The cabinet had asked the finance ministry during its meeting on March 21 to manage the health quarantines and coordinate with concerned authorities to allow the health ministry to carry out its duties in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Curfew violations

KUWAIT: Police arrested 14 curfew violators on Monday, including nine Kuwaitis and five expats. Eight were arrested in Farwaniya governorate, three in Jahra, two in the Capital, and one in Al-Ahmadi.

Embassies coordinate expats' repatriations

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Kuwait's International Airport remains closed, but some repatriation flights for expats wishing to leave are still operating. People wishing to travel home are asked to check with their embassies to know what flights are available and if their country is allowing returns at the moment.

Some embassies in Kuwait are repatriating their citizens, as citizens of Egypt, India, Turkey, Syria, and others can contact their embassies for information. Meanwhile, others are allowed to book

by themselves if there is an available flight. In that case, people have to keep an eye on airlines' websites or subscribe to their email service to receive the latest updates on operating special flights from Kuwait to some destinations. Flights can sometimes be canceled in short notice, however.

The UK embassy in Kuwait announced that Qatar Airways is still offering commercial flights out of Kuwait via Doha. However, with these challenging circumstances, airlines confirm/cancel flights at very short notice, sometimes the day before. The embassy also informed that people who are leaving from Mahboula should send full details to obtain special permission for them and for a person who will pick them up by sending WhatsApp to +965 9727-1877 a day before the flight.

Meanwhile, the US Embassy also affirmed that Qatar Airways is currently operating outbound flights from Kuwait to Doha (Hamad International Airport) with connections to selected US cities.

These one-way flights are available for US citizens and US Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs). The US embassy, on the website, notes that all other flight announcements will be sent to Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) registrants (<https://step.state.gov/STEPMobile/Default.aspx>), posted on the Embassy website (<https://kw.usembassy.gov>) and amplified by the Embassy's social media platforms.

In the meantime, the Australian embassy also asked people who are traveling to Australia during the curfew (especially if they are resident in Mahboula or Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh), to email the Embassy on consular.kuwaitcity@dfat.gov.au.

For Jordanian citizens, the embassy in Kuwait launched a website (www.safelyhome.gov.jo) to register the names of people who wish to return, but priority is given for students, visa violators, then others. All foreigners in Kuwait should register with their embassy to stay updated on important news and information from their home government regarding repatriation and other issues.

Group arrested for fighting during 'exercise' period

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Police arrested several men who were involved in a fight in Hawally on Monday during the period designated for walking exercise within residential areas during the total curfew. They were taken to concerned authorities to face legal action. The arrest came after a video showing people fighting in a street in Kuwait went viral on social media.

Meanwhile, the interior ministry

announced that the electronic crimes fighting department suspended nine accounts on social media for broadcasting fake news and rumors, noting that charges were filed against their operators. The department said it monitors activity on social media, and detects attempts to publish rumors before taking legal action in coordination with the information ministry and concerned prosecution. It urged the public to take news from official sources only.



KUWAIT: People walk in a Salmiya neighborhood on Monday during a two-hour period allowed for exercise during total curfew. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

EPA: Vehicles' CO2 emission down in Kuwait

KUWAIT: A study of air quality, carried out by Kuwait's Environment Public Authority (EPA), had shown a considerable lowering of CO2 emission and other harmful gases from vehicles due to the partial curfew measures set counter the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spread in the country, said an official Monday. Deputy Direct for EPA's environmental monitoring Sameera Al-Kanderi said that the air quality had improved with emissions of nitrogen oxide (NOx) and Carbon

monoxide (CO) going down by 25 and 30 percent respectively. The study — carried out by stations throughout the country — had shown that the air quality had improved recently, she indicated. In a connected COVID-19 matter, Kanderi said that the EPA would be holding a joint study with the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) and the Health Ministry to determine how the coronavirus spreads in closed and open environments. — KUNA

Ministry examines 53 supermarkets, pharmacies

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has completed the inspection of 53 supermarkets, commercial establishments and pharmacies to ensure the flow of purchases and food deliveries and price stability. The ministry is also currently monitoring 64 subsidised food outlets and will continue to dispatch its inspection teams around the country during the

coronavirus lockdown measures, it said in a statement yesterday. Some 284 consumer complaints were received by the ministry on its 135 hotline. The need to comply with laws and regulations amid these unprecedented circumstances was strongly underlined, and the ministry warned it would be on the lookout for those seeking to take advantage of the current situation. — KUNA

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International

WEDNESDAY, MAY 13, 2020



Virus pandemic politics costing lives in Brazil

Turkey turns to medical diplomacy to heal damaged relations

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WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump speaks during a press briefing about coronavirus testing in the Rose Garden of the White House on May 11, 2020 in Washington, DC. — AFP

Trump abruptly ends press briefing

Concerns over virus spreading in White House

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump abruptly ended his coronavirus press briefing on Monday after getting into a testy exchange with an Asian-American reporter. CBS News reporter Weijia Jiang asked Trump why he continued to insist that the US was doing better than other countries when it came to testing for the virus. "Why does that matter?" she asked. "Why is this a global competition when, every day, Americans are still losing their lives?" "They're losing their lives everywhere in the world," Trump replied. "And maybe that's a question you should ask China. Don't ask me, ask China that question, OK?"

Jiang, who identifies herself in her Twitter bio as a "Chinese born West Virginian," pushed back. "Sir, why are you saying that to me specifically?" she said, implying it was due to her race. "I'm saying it to anybody who would ask a nasty question like that," Trump said. He then attempted to move on to another reporter as Jiang continued to press him about his response. Trump called on another female reporter but then immediately called on someone else. When the woman tried to ask her question, Trump abruptly ended the press conference and walked back into the White House.

The internet was quick to rally round Jiang, with the hashtag #StandWithWeijiaJiang soon trending on Twitter. "I #StandWithWeijiaJiang against Trump's racist tantrums," tweeted "Star Trek" actor and prominent Asian-American activist George Takei. Reporter and CNN political analyst April Ryan, who has also been on the receiving end of Trump's words, tweeted: "Welcome to the club! This is sickening! It is his habit!" Trump, who has never been shy about his dislike for the news media, has often locked horns with journalists

during his coronavirus press briefings. More than 80,000 people have died in the US from the coronavirus pandemic, out of more than 1.3 million cases, according to the latest figures on Monday from Johns Hopkins University, by far the highest death toll of any country.

Virus in White House

Meanwhile, US President has dismissed concerns over the possible spread of coronavirus in the White House but said he may limit contact with Vice President Mike Pence. Trump, speaking to masked reporters in the White House Rose Garden, suggested that Pence was in quarantine after his press secretary tested positive, though he did not say it outright. Katie Miller, the spokeswoman for Pence, who heads the White House's coronavirus task force, tested positive for coronavirus last week along with a personal valet to Trump.

Three members of the task force have since gone into quarantine - infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci, Robert Redfield, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Stephen Hahn, head of the Food and Drug Administration. A Pence spokesman denied over the weekend that the vice president was also in quarantine but Trump suggested he was when asked on Monday whether he had considered limiting his contact with him.

"I would say that he and I will be talking about that," Trump said at an occasionally testy press conference.

"During this quarantine period, we'll probably talk," Trump said. "I have not seen him since then." "We can talk on the phone," he said of Pence. "He tested negative, so we have to understand that, but he comes into contact with a lot of people."

'No vulnerability whatsoever'

Trump sought to play down any concerns about an outbreak of the virus in the cramped quarters of the West Wing, where the president works out of the Oval Office. "We want to keep our country running so we have a lot of people coming in and out (of the White House) and many of those people, most of those people, are tested," he said. "Everybody coming into the president's office gets tested, and I've felt no vulnerability whatsoever," he said. Trump, who is desperately seeking to reboot the economy ahead of the November election, said the US was making "tremendous strides" in ramping up testing and the number of virus infections is "coming down very rapidly."

He said it was essential to get the country reopened. "The people want our country open," the president said. "Some states could be moving more quickly," he said. "People are dying in the lockdown position too." Trump abruptly ended the press conference after an exchange with a CBS News reporter who asked him why when Americans were losing their lives did he keep insisting that the US was doing better than other countries when it came to testing. "Well, they're losing

their lives everywhere in the world," Trump said. "And maybe that's a question you should ask China. Don't ask me, ask China that question, OK?" The CBS reporter, Weijia Jiang, who is of Chinese-American origin, then asked Trump "Sir, why are you saying that to me specifically?" "I'm telling. I'm saying it to anybody who would ask a nasty question like that," Trump replied before abruptly ending the press conference.

'Scary to go to work'

Though it may appear spacious in movies and TV shows, the West Wing is actually rather cramped, making social distancing difficult. It houses not just the president's office but also those of some of his closest advisers, the press briefing room and the desks of White House correspondents, who work elbow to elbow. Kevin Hassett, a senior economic advisor to the president, told CBS over the weekend that it is "scary to go to work." "I would be safer sitting at home in my house than going into a West Wing that with even all the testing in the world and the best medical team on Earth, is a relatively cramped place," Hassett told another network, CNN.

In a memo issued on Monday, the White House instructed all staff to wear a mask when inside the West Wing, except when at their desks. Unlike a number of other world leaders, the 73-year-old Trump has not been wearing a mask in public. He said Monday that Americans have "learned about face masks." "The good and the bad, by the way," he said. "It's not a one-sided thing, believe it or not," Trump said without elaborating. The United States is the country the hardest-hit by the virus with more than 80,000 deaths and 1.3 million infections.— Agencies



'Don't ask me, ask China that question, OK'

Lebanon fears second coronavirus wave as new infections surge

BEIRUT: Lebanese authorities warned of a new wave of coronavirus cases after the number jumped to its highest point in more than a month as the government eased some restrictions on public life. The country has been under lockdown since mid-March to rein in an outbreak that has infected 859 people and killed 26.

Lebanon started lifting restrictions last week as part of a longer-term plan, letting restaurants, hair salons, construction sites and other businesses open so far at lower capacity. But the government may shut the country down again to ward off any resurgence, with Lebanon's higher defense council set to convene on Tuesday. Beirut airport has been closed for nearly two months, except for thousands of expatriates returning home, some of whom have added to the rise in infections. More flights repatriating Lebanese are expected.

After a drop in cases which the government hailed as a success, the health ministry recorded 36 new infections on Sunday, the highest one-shot uptick in at least a month, and 14 more on Monday. The ministry asked the Lebanese to remain patient and stick to safety guidelines to prevent a second wave. More than 10 people got infected after an expat who returned from Nigeria last week received visitors, a



BEIRUT: Nurses gathered to attend a mass celebrated by a priest in the coronavirus COVID-19 section of the hospital, in the neighborhood of Ashrafieh of the Lebanese capital Beirut's eastern suburbs. — AFP

ministry official said. The man, who had tested negative when he first arrived, did not comply with self-isolation rules.

One of those infected, an army soldier, then carried the virus to a military court where 13 others also caught it. The interior ministry has extended the hours

of an overnight curfew, from 7 pm to 5 am, warning that most businesses may have to shut again if the danger persists. The pandemic has compounded woes in Lebanon, which was already wrestling with a financial crisis that has slashed more than half the value of its currency since late last year. — Reuters

Syrian clashes kill 48; highest toll since truce

BEIRUT: Clashes in northwest Syria killed 48 regime fighters and jihadists Sunday in the highest such death toll since the start of a two-month-old ceasefire there, a monitor said. A truce since March 6 had largely stemmed fighting in Syria's last major rebel bastion of Idlib after a months-long regime assault that killed hundreds of civilians and forced almost a million to flee. But before dawn on Sunday rebels attacked the positions of pro-regime fighters on the western flank of the jihadist-dominated region, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The clashes in the Sahl al-Ghab area killed 35 regime fighters as well as 13 jihadists including from the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Hurras al-Deen group, the Britain-based monitor said.

"It's the highest death toll for fighters since the truce came into force," said Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman, who relies on sources inside Syria. "There had been intermittent clashes and mutual bombardment between both sides before, but this is the most violent attack yet." Abdel Rahman said clashes were ongoing after dark on Sunday night. The Idlib region of some three million people is dominated by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, but other jihadists such as Hurras al-Deen and rebel groups are also present.— AFP

International

Europe, New York start emerging from lockdown

Fresh COVID-19 cases hit Asia

NEW YORK: Swathes of Europe as well as New York began the long process of reopening from coronavirus lockdowns on Monday, but a resurgence of infections in China and South Korea offered a sobering reminder of the dangers of a second wave of cases. The mixed fortunes illustrate the high-wire act governments face across the globe as they try to resuscitate shattered economies while keeping in check a pandemic that has now killed some 284,000 people and infected more than 4.1 million.

For the second straight day, the United States recorded fewer than 900 days over the past 24 hours although the toll shot past 80,000, by far the highest in the world, according to Johns Hopkins University. New York, the worst-hit US state, gave the green light to return gradually this week to normal life - but not yet in packed New York City, which will wait at least until June.

"We start a new chapter today," Governor Andrew Cuomo told reporters, adding, "It's an exciting new phase: we're all anxious to get back to work." As France and Spain embraced new freedoms and Britain also announced plans for a partial reopening, the Chinese city of Wuhan where the pandemic was born reported a second day of new cases after a month without a sign of the virus. And South Korea announced its highest number of infections for more than a month driven by a cluster in a Seoul nightlife district.

With millions out of work and economies badly bruised, governments are desperate to hit the accelerator, but most are choosing a gradual approach as fears about a resurgence of the virus loom large. In parts of Europe, officials have been emboldened by promising trends, with Spain's daily fatalities falling to 123 and Italy - once Europe's epicenter - reporting fewer than 1,000 patients in intensive care, the lowest since March 10 before the peak of its outbreak. France has seen its daily fatalities decline for several

days but reported an uptick on Monday with 263, as it began to dismantle a military field hospital set up when hospitals were being inundated.

The French were able to venture outdoors without filling in a permit for the first time in nearly eight weeks on Monday, and some shops reopened their doors. The wide boulevards of the Champs-Élysées in Paris were once again back to life with cars and shoppers waiting patiently to make purchases, but things were not as before. Police swarmed in to break up picnickers who defied guidelines to gather together without masks.

Many Spaniards revelled in being able to visit outdoor terraces and cafes again after months under one of the world's toughest lockdowns, although virus hotspots such as Madrid and Barcelona remain under wraps. "I really missed this, now you value these little pleasures," said Jesus Vazquez, a 51-year-old builder, as he enjoyed a sandwich and beer in the sunshine outside a bar in the city of Tarragona. Shopping strips were once again populated in Greece, while in other parts of Europe from the Netherlands to Switzerland and Croatia youngsters headed back to the classroom after weeks at home.

In the Czech Republic some teens revelled in being able to go to the cinema again - a novel outing after months of lockdown. "We loved to see what it's like just to go and see a film with my friends again," 16-year-old Tomas Fohler said from behind a mask, now compulsory in the country. Germany too has set in motion the reopening of shops, eateries, schools and gyms, but Chancellor Angela Merkel refreshed warnings to stay safe after official data showed the infection rate picking up speed again.

"It is necessary that we can have confidence that people are actually sticking to the basic guidelines, so keeping distance, covering mouth and nose, being considerate of each other," she said Monday. In Britain, the gov-



NEW YORK: Medical workers from Lenox Hill Hospital come outside while people show gratitude as part of the nightly #ClapBecauseWeCare during the coronavirus pandemic in New York City. — AFP

ernment unveiled a "cautious roadmap" setting out new freedoms which included outdoor exercise and allowing construction, manufacturing and other manual workers back on the job. Almost seven weeks after a nationwide stay-at-home order was put in place, more than 31,800 people have died in Britain - a figure second only to the United States.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also said that stay-at-home orders will be eased for most workers this week, despite a surge of 10,000 new coronavirus cases every day. US President Donald Trump, facing re-election in November, has been especially eager to end restrictions - and insisted the White House was safe, even as he said he would limit contact with Vice President Mike Pence, whose press secretary tested positive.

"Everybody coming into the president's office gets tested, and I've felt no vulnerability whatsoever," Trump said in a testy news conference that he abruptly ended.

With governments across the world trying to avoid a second wave, Asian nations that were among the first engulfed by the virus but have since brought it to heel are being keenly watched. Much of China has begun to get back to a form of normality, and on Monday Shanghai Disneyland threw open its gates following a three-month shutdown. "We are very much looking forward to the first day of reopening," said one eager visitor named Kitty. "We have stayed at home for around two months and got bored enough." But enthusiasm in China was tempered by news on Sunday that one person had tested

positive for the virus in Wuhan. There were five more cases on Monday.

Local health officials said the new infections were all from the same residential compound and were mostly older people. South Korean officials ordered nightclubs and bars closed after a new cluster of at least 86 cases linked to an entertainment district in the capital - many in gay clubs. Officials scrambled to trace thousands of people who visited the area, but efforts were hampered with many believed to be reluctant to come forward because of the stigma surrounding homosexuality. "If you hesitate a single day, our daily clock may stop for a month. Please contact the nearest clinic or health center right now," urged Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun. — AFP



284,000 people killed, more than 4.1 million infected

Biden ramps up digital footprint



VIRGINIA: A man wearing a face mask walks past signs for Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign amid the coronavirus outbreak in Alexandria, Virginia. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden is rapidly scaling up his digital campaign as he scrambles to compete with Donald Trump's formidable online operation, but Democrats say the presidential hopeful must move beyond flat speeches delivered from his basement. The Democratic Party's presumptive nominee is doubling the size of his digital team—currently at a reported 25 people—and his campaign said Monday it is launching a flood-the-zone approach across multiple online platforms.

But with November's election less than six months away and traditional campaigning halted due to the coronavirus pandemic, Biden is in an awkward spot. While Biden talks into a camera in an empty basement studio in Delaware where he is under stay-at-home orders, Trump is center-stage, acting—successfully or not—to address the crisis and reopen the shuttered economy. The contrast was driven home last week when Biden's virtual rally in Florida was marred by technical glitches.

Some Democratic campaign experts have described Biden's basement tapes as too static and packaged. Strategists have openly worried that Biden is already dangerously behind Trump on key metrics across platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. The 77-year-old former vice president will need to rapidly adjust to new political realities if he is to compete with a president whose data-mining and voter targeting operations are vast. The 2020 election is "a battle for the soul of this nation," Biden likes to say.

"But it's also a battle for the soul of the internet. And it's a battle we intend to

win." Biden's digital director Rob Flaherty tweeted Saturday as he announced several new hires. They include senior digital advisor Caitlin Mitchell, a former top staffer for Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign. Trump's online effort has been fire and brimstone since Day 1. Last week campaign chair Brad Parscale likened Trump's organized digital campaign to attacks by the "Death Star" from Star Wars. Biden's campaign argues that Biden reflects Americans' desire for a leader with skills and experience to get the job done.

The message? "He's ready to lead in a moment of crisis like this, and that he has the compassion and empathy that Trump has been sorely lacking," Biden deputy rapid response director Mike Gwin told AFP. Just how Biden gets that message out may be the campaign's defining question. "Online speeches from his basement won't cut it," warned Barack Obama campaign veterans David Axelrod and David Plouffe in a recent New York Times essay. "In order to break through and be heard, (Biden) will have to up the tempo of his campaign, fully utilize his army of powerful surrogates and embrace a new suite of virtual, data-driven tools and creative tactics."

The campaign argues it is on its way, with Biden videos, ads or events viewed online 112 million times since mid-March. Democratic strategist Lis Smith said Biden must master the digital genre. "There was a conventional wisdom for a long time that Joe Biden was screwed because he was stuck in the basement" during coronavirus, Smith said in a Politico webcast Monday. — AFP

Pandemic pushing millions of Mexicans into poverty

MEXICO CITY: The economic fallout from coronavirus could add nine million people to Mexico's poor, according to a government study released on Monday calling for aid like pensions and insurance in the country that provides no federal jobless benefits. Increased hardship could translate to at least 70 million Mexicans, 56% of the country, not earning enough to cover basic needs, said CONEVAL, the autonomous public agency that measures poverty.

That would be an increase from about 50% in 2018. Mexico's overall poverty rate, a different measure that includes income and factors like education and access to food, dropped in the decade before 2018 to about 42% of the population, it said. During that time, access to health care and the quality of housing improved most, the report said.

The general conclusion is that this crisis threatens Mexico's advances in social development and will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups," CONEVAL said. "Facing this challenge, it is necessary to broaden and strengthen the response measures." Mexico has about 35,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus, which has killed at least 3,400 people. With businesses forced to close to help stop the spread of the disease, more than 346,000 formal jobs were lost between mid-March and early April, the government said, with further layoffs expected as the economy shrinks.

CONEVAL suggested policymakers consider introducing minimum universal pensions, unemployment insurance or universal basic incomes to help the most vulnerable. Currently, there is little help for workers who lose their jobs because Mexico has no federal unemployment ben-



MEXICO CITY: A coffin is seen during a protest against alleged human rights violations committed against COVID-19 patients in the state of Nuevo Leon, in front of the National Palace in Mexico City during the novel coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

efits. Jobless workers are mostly forced to rely on savings, their families or upon private charity to survive.

The effects of losing a job are long lasting, and many workers in Mexico earn salaries near the poverty line, said David Kaplan, lead labor market specialist at the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), a lender to governments in the region. "It doesn't take a big hit to knock these people into poverty," he said. In Mexico, women have been particularly vulnerable to the pandemic as they make up the majority of healthcare workers and face longer hours, risk of illness and housekeeping responsibilities, the report said. — Reuters

Low-skilled men suffer highest COVID fatalities in England and Wales

LONDON: Men in the lowest-skilled jobs have the highest death rates involving COVID-19 among working-age people, according to data for England and Wales that also showed fatalities among nurses and doctors were no higher than the average. Monday's official figures were published after Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Sunday that manufacturing and construction workers should be encouraged to go back to their jobs, drawing concern from trade union groups. Men in low-skilled occupations suffered 21.4 COVID-19-related deaths per 100,000, more than double the average for working-age males of just under 10 deaths per 100,000, the Office for National Statistics said.

COVID-19 is the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus. Male security guards had a death rate of more than four times the overall average for working-age men. Male chefs, taxi drivers, chauffeurs and bus and coach drivers and also had higher death rates, contrasting with men classed as having professional occupations - which typically require a university education - whose mortality rates involving COVID-19 was 5.6.

Care workers and home carers - some of whom have raised concerns publicly about a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) - had significantly raised rates of 23.4 for men per 100,000 COVID-19-related deaths. The rate for female care workers was 9.6, above the average death rate for working age women overall of 5.2 per 100,000. But healthcare workers, including doctors and nurses, who generally have more access to PPE, were not found to have higher rates of COVID-19-related deaths than people of the same age and sex in the general population.

"This suggests that PPE is working, or that by the time patients are ill enough to be admitted to hospital, often after over a week, they may be less infectious, or a combination of both factors," Keith Neal, an epidemiology professor at the University of Nottingham, said. Michael Head, a senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton, said guidance from the government for safe working, due to be published later on Monday, had to provide detail on how workers could be protected. "Employers and employees need that reassurance," he said. — Reuters

'Wear face coverings', Britain says; confusion surrounds lockdown

LONDON: Prime Minister Boris Johnson set out a cautious plan on Monday to get Britain back to work, including advice on wearing home-made face coverings, though his attempt to lift the coronavirus lockdown prompted confusion and even satire. The United Kingdom has one of the world's highest official COVID-19 death tolls and, after criticism that he was slow to impose a lockdown, Johnson is wary of triggering a second wave of infection.

"Our challenge now is to find a way forward that preserves our hard-won gains while easing the burden of lockdown," he told the House of Commons. "This is a supremely difficult balance." Opposition Labor Party leader Keir Starmer said the government had been issuing conflicting guidance that did not answer the public's practical questions about going back to work. "What the country needs at this time is clarity and reassurance, but at the moment both are in pretty short supply," he said.

Having refused for several weeks to give any indication of how it planned to start relaxing the lockdown, the government opted for a gradual release of information over 24 hours, starting with a solemn televised address by Johnson on Sunday. On Monday, the government published a 51-page document entitled "Our Plan to Rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy", followed by a series of sector-by-sector documents offering guidance to employers and workers. — Reuters

International

Israel remains focused on Iran rivalry despite virus

Israel targets allied Iranian forces, Hezbollah fighters

JERUSALEM: Comments last week from an unnamed Israeli defense official that Iran was reducing its presence in Syria sparked fierce debate about Tehran's next moves and how the Jewish state should respond. Iran policy will inevitably be a top concern for the Israeli government to be sworn in Thursday, a unity coalition agreed after more than a year of unprecedented political deadlock. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who will be in Israel the previous day, is to discuss Iran with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and incoming defense minister Benny Gantz.

Their focus will inevitably be on Iranian nuclear ambitions, with the US pursuing a campaign of "maximum pressure", backed by Israel, to deter an Iranian weapons program. But developments in Syria have placed renewed attention on Iranian action in Israel's northern neighbor. Israel has launched hundreds of attacks in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011 - targeting government troops, allied Iranian forces and fighters from Tehran-backed Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

But in an apparent intensification, six air strikes attributed to Israel have been carried out on Iranian targets in Syria over the past three weeks. Israel almost never claims - or denies - such strikes, consistently telling enquiring reporters that it "does not comment on foreign reports". But following the most recent bombing last week, outgoing Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett said: "Iran has nothing to do in Syria... (and) we won't stop before they leave Syria."

Bennett, who may be out of government entirely depending on last-minute coalition negotiations, accused Iran of "trying to establish itself on the border with Israel to threaten Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa".



US pursuing a 'campaign of maximum pressure'

'Iranians not leaving'

Since the start of the year, Iran has faced multiple crises: the US killing of top general Qasem Soleimani, the region's deadliest coronavirus outbreak with over 100,000 people infected, and tumbling oil prices slashing the state budget. All of which has some observers wondering whether Iran is trying to reduce the cost of its involvement in Syria. Such speculation was further fuelled by an Israeli defense official recently quoted in Israeli media as saying: "For the first time since (deploying forces to) Syria, Iran is reducing the number of its soldiers there and evacuating bases."

And a US diplomat said: "It would make sense at a

certain point that Iran would want to cut its losses and downsize its presence there just because it's increasingly costly to them in terms of life and property." But not everyone in Israel is convinced that Tehran is ready to abandon Syria. "The Iranians are not leaving," said Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, who suggested that Iran may instead be relying more heavily on local forces. "Still the commanders are from Hezbollah and Iran and the cheap soldiers are Shia militia and local Syrians," he said.

Cost-cutting

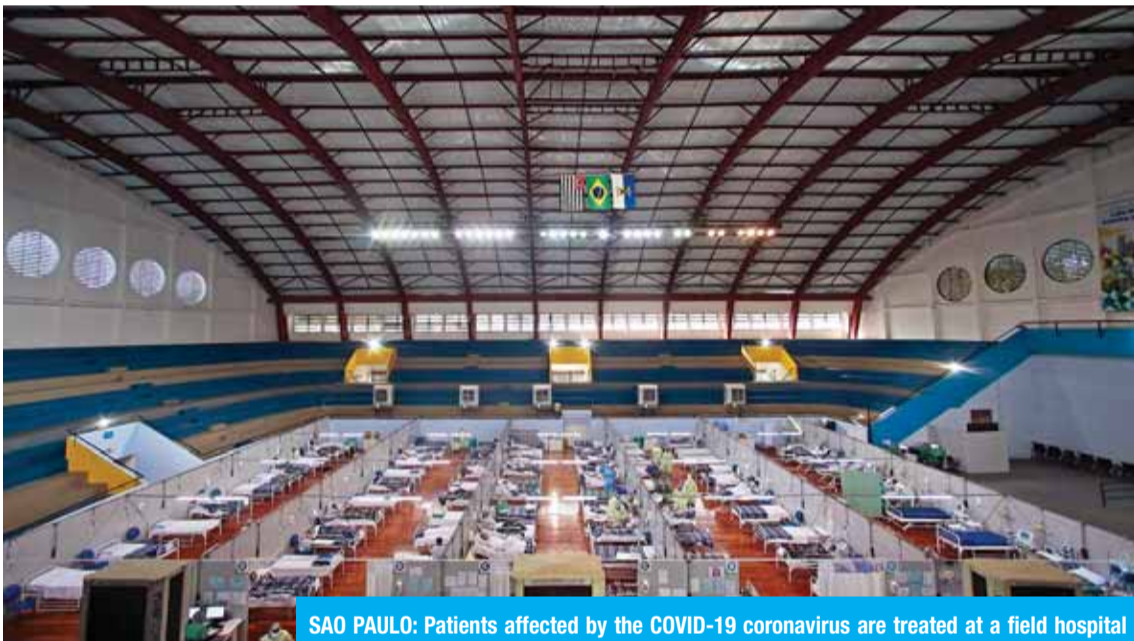
A source in Jerusalem working on Iran policy agreed that Tehran remains committed to Syria and likely views its investment as a "sunk cost". "They are waiting for the revenues, they can't withdraw so fast without getting the economic fruit that they think they should get," the source said. Another source in Jerusalem claimed that Iran was attempting to divert funding for its coronavirus response towards paying its proxies in Syria. "They are using the virus as an opportunity to increase funds for destabilizing activities in the region," the source said, without giving further details. In April, sanctions-hit Iran urged the International Monetary Fund to issue a \$5 billion emergency loan to help it combat the virus.

Yoram Schweitzer, an analyst at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said strikes on Syria were either a response to growing Iranian operations or a bid to weaken an enemy already burdened



HASAKEH PROVINCE: A displaced Syrian girl carries a pot of chickpeas at the Washukanni camp for the internally displaced in Syria's northeastern Hasakeh province during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. — AFP

by the pandemic. But Israel will need to tread carefully, warned the Yedioth Aharonot newspaper. "What Israel needs is a defence minister and an IDF (army) chief of staff who can do the necessary risk-management work together, and act to continue to degrade the Iranian military presence in Syria without creating situations that might draw the entire region into renewed conflict," the paper said.— AFP



SAO PAULO: Patients affected by the COVID-19 coronavirus are treated at a field hospital set up at a sports gym in Santo Andre, Sao Paulo state, Brazil. — AFP

Virus pandemic politics costing lives in Brazil

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro keeps saying coronavirus fears are overblown. Other officials at the federal, state and local levels insist the danger is all too real. Brazil is torn by a deep political divide over how to respond to the pandemic, and it is taking a heavy human toll. On Saturday, even as the death toll in Brazil crossed the threshold of 10,000, Bolsonaro continued pressing to get the country back to work. "The army of unemployed keeps growing," he tweeted. "Is chaos coming?" added the far-right leader, who has compared the virus to a "little flu" and condemned the "hysteria" surrounding it.

Some argue the "chaos" is already here — at least as far as the Brazilian government's response goes. Bolsonaro's criticism of stay-at-home measures to fight the virus has put him at odds with state and local authorities across Brazil, not to mention his own former health minister. The president sacked the latter, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, last month after a long series of public spat. Meanwhile, Brazil has emerged as the epicenter of the pandemic in Latin America, with 11,519 deaths so far. Experts say under-testing means the real figure is likely far higher, and that things stand to get a lot worse.

"We know from history that anytime there's such a cacophony in a situation like this, such huge disagreement on public policy among leaders, tragedy ensues," said Brazilian historian Sidney Chalhouh, a professor at Harvard University. As an example, he cited the last major cholera outbreak in Europe, in the late 19th century, that killed more than 10,000 people in Hamburg, Germany. "It was largely caused by divisions between the local political elite and dominant economic interests, which trumped public health concerns. And the result was an even bigger economic catastrophe," he said.

Turkey turns to medical diplomacy to heal relations

ANKARA: Emblazoned with Turkish flags and presidential seals, crates packed with medical equipment are loaded onto planes, part of a major aid campaign by Ankara which has dispatched supplies to dozens of countries since the new coronavirus pandemic erupted. "There is hope after despair and many suns after darkness," says a message on every shipment - a line from 13th century Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi, which looks to better days not just in the battle against COVID-19 but also for Turkey's fraught diplomacy.

With its relations with NATO allies in Europe and the United States darkened by disputes over Russian

Polarizing disease

Bolsonaro supporters have held a series of anti-confinement protests in recent weeks. Sometimes the president himself has joined in, hitting the street, shaking hands and giving fiery speeches, all while refusing to wear a face mask. The protests have included virulent attacks on Congress and the Supreme Court, which have moved to counter Bolsonaro's anti-confinement measures. At times, they have erupted into violence, including against journalists and even nurses.

But a recent poll by the Datafolha institute found that 67 percent of Brazilians believe stay-at-home measures are needed to contain the virus, even if they hurt the economy. Even in his own camp, Bolsonaro's support is far from universal. Another poll found that while 56 percent of those who call themselves right-wing or center-right supported the president's handling of the pandemic, 40 percent did not. "The more closely related people are to someone who has been infected or died, the more they distance themselves from Bolsonaro," said political scientist Carlos Pereira of the Getulio Vargas Foundation, who conducted the latter poll.

'Anti-knowledge'

Like his US counterpart Donald Trump, whom he admires, Bolsonaro has touted the medication chloroquine as a wonder drug against COVID-19. Scientists at Brazil's leading public health research institute, Fiocruz, have stated that preliminary studies do not indicate chloroquine is an effective treatment for the disease. Perceived to be attacking the president, they have received threats on social media in response.

"We're talking about a far-right, anti-democratic government," some of whose supporters have "fascist" tendencies, said sociologist Debora Messenberg, of the University of Brasilia. "We can't even talk about society being 'polarized' in the usual sense. It's not a democratic polarization. Right now, the debate is between democracy and authoritarianism," she said. Brazil, like the United States, is facing the pandemic "with a government that is anti-knowledge," said Chalhouh. The Bolsonaro administration "is depicting this as a public health catastrophe versus an economic catastrophe. But that's a harmful view that will drive us toward both," he said. — AFP

missile defenses, human rights and Western sanctions on Iran, Turkey hopes the virus crisis is an opportunity to soothe recent tensions. Despite battling one of the world's biggest coronavirus outbreaks at home - where the death toll now exceeds 3,700 -, Turkey has sent medical aid to 61 countries, including the United States, Spain, Italy, France and Britain. By its own calculations, Ankara has been the world's third biggest aid distributor during the outbreak, sending face masks, protective suits, testing kits, disinfectant and respirators.

In a letter to President Donald Trump sent with one shipment, President Tayyip Erdogan said he hoped the "spirit of solidarity" Turkey had shown would help US politicians "better understand the strategic importance of our relations". Ankara faces potential US sanctions over its purchase of Russian S-400 missile defences, which it bought last year but has not yet fully deployed. Despite the threat of sanctions, it says the systems will ultimately be activated.—Reuters

Cafes and parks reopen; Ukraine eases lockdown

KIEV: Mitya Yatim, the owner of a wine bar in central Kiev, opened to the public on Monday for the first time after nearly two months of lockdown that left his business reeling. He says the anti-virus restrictions introduced in Ukraine two months ago to slow the spread of the coronavirus "hit us hard". "We were not ready for it," Yatim, who runs the Malevich wine bar, told AFP on Monday as Ukraine eased its lockdown by opening outdoor areas of cafes and coffee shops. "We had to go into debt to pay rent. Our people were left without work," Yatim explained.

Ukraine in mid-March ordered all non-essential businesses to close, with only grocery stores and pharmacies permitted to remain open as part of the efforts to stop the pandemic. Public transport has been reserved for employees of essential services, including police and hospital staff. Under new government regulations which entered into force Monday, Ukrainians are now also permitted to visit beauty salons, dental clinics, and parks and public squares.

"This day has come because most of us adhered to the rules," Ukraine's health ministry said Monday. "However, this doesn't mean we can neglect security measures. About 500 new coronavirus infections are confirmed in Ukraine every day," the ministry added. The country has so far confirmed 15,648 coronavirus cases and 408 deaths. The ex-Soviet nation with a population of 40 million is one of the poorest countries in Europe and the economic fallout from the pandemic threatens to make matters worse.

Disposable plates

Georgiy Museliani, owns the Khachapuri House cafe which serves Georgian food but shut its doors two months ago. His kitchen continued providing takeaway meals during the lockdown, but on Monday he reopened the outdoor seating area, with live music and free ice cream for children. The food is served on disposable plates and customers are not permitted to even touch the menus, Museliani told AFP, citing new rules.

Tables must be placed one and a half metres apart and only two people can sit together. Everyone is required to wear a face mask, not ideal for diners. "How will this mask save us? It won't! It's like putting a T-shirt on a hedgehog so that he doesn't freeze," Museliani says. However he told AFP he is glad to see the lockdown eased and life begin to return to normal, saying he was sceptical of the government's lockdown, which forced him to cut salaries and reduce the number of working days to "survive". "They just locked everyone at home!" the 45-year-old said. —AFP



ISTANBUL: A barber wearing a protective mask cuts a man's hair in his barber shop in Istanbul, on the first day of shops reopening following a closure since March 21, 2020 due to the pandemic. — AFP

Greek migrant hotel ransacked in latest tensions

ARNISSA: When plans were leaked last week to move dozens of asylum seekers from an island camp to a hotel in the northern Greek village of Arnissa, there was a swift and violent response. Around 250 people burned and looted the empty hotel to prevent the transfer, according to eyewitnesses, in the latest tensions over the relocation of migrants in Greece. "It was really scary. They threw stones, lit fires and ransacked the entire hotel," said a young woman who declined to give her name. "My father who is old and lives near the hotel hasn't slept for two days because of his fear," she told AFP. The Greek government has promised to transfer more than 2,000 asylum seekers from islands to the mainland to ease pressure on camps.

But fed up with shouldering the burden of Europe's snail-paced asylum system, locals have protested against the presence of migrants in their towns. Government spokesman Stelios Petsas on Monday attributed the May 5 incident to "misinformation" and misplaced fear among locals that refugees will spread the coronavirus. "Where there are pockets of opposition it's usually due to misinformation... not everyone has understood that we have taken very specific measures since the start of the health crisis," he told reporters.

Police have opened an investigation into the attack which left the hotel in ruins, but no arrests have been made. Windows were broken, furniture was smashed and the rooms were strewn with rocks and charred debris. The owners requested anonymity for fear of further reprisals. Meanwhile, some residents stressed that the asylum-seekers were not welcome. "Nothing happened here. We just chased away the illegal migrants," one irate villager said.

'Refugees chasing refugees'

Attempts to move elderly refugees or families with children from overcrowded island camps to the mainland have run into opposition before. The same refugees that were going to stay in Arnissa - whose nationalities were not disclosed - were previously living in the dismal Moria camp on the island of Lesbos, and had earlier been denied entry into another village in northern Greece.

In October, a hotel owner in the town of Vrasna near Thessaloniki said she had received arson threats after agreeing to temporarily host a group of asylum-seekers. In the days before the Arnissa hotel was destroyed, rumours were circulating that authorities were bringing people to the village who were "presented as monsters", said Dimitris, a 68-year-old resident. Dimitris said he believed some of last week's attackers are themselves descended from ethnic Greek refugees uprooted from Turkey decades earlier. "Refugees chasing refugees. This is unbelievable to me," he said.

Another villager, 36-year-old Panagiotis, said that some locals had posted footage of the attack on their social media accounts. "Now that the police are investigating, they deleted these posts and are hiding," he said. The mayor of nearby Edessa, the largest town in the area, has questioned the logic of the transfer in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. More than 150 people have died from COVID-19 in Greece. Migrant camps have been placed under lockdown until May 21. There have been confirmed cases in two camps and at a hotel on the mainland - although none in migrant facilities on islands such as Lesbos.

"Now that we are wary about the course of the coronavirus contagion... they decided to transfer migrants," Edessa mayor Dimitris Yannou wrote on Facebook days before the hotel attack. "Edessa is too full of refugees and migrants," he added. The asylum-seekers from Lesbos were eventually transferred in secret to a hotel near Thessaloniki by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). "These people remain in quarantine for 14 days as is prescribed," said an IOM representative in charge of their transfer. "They are safe and healthy. We support them and they want to forget what happened." — AFP

Business

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10 UK aviation sector faces crisis over quarantine



11 Mezzan Holding holds 19th Annual General Assembly



11 U, V, W or L? The alphabet soup of economic recovery scenarios



In this file photo, Saudi security men stand at the entrance of the oil processing plant of the state oil giant Aramco in Abqaiq, in the oil-rich Eastern Province.. Stock markets in energy-rich Gulf states tumbled with Saudi shares down 3.0 percent following worldwide losses amid fears over the coronavirus pandemic and an oil price war. — AFP

Aramco Q1 profit slides as oil prices fall

Q1 dividends of \$18.75bn, highest of any listed company

DUBAI: Saudi Arabian state oil giant Aramco yesterday reported a 25 percent fall in first-quarter net profit, missing analyst estimates, but its quarterly dividend was in line with a plan for a \$75 billion base payout to shareholders for the year.

Brent crude prices fell 65.6 percent in the first quarter, before OPEC+ producers agreed to cut oil supply by a record 9.7 million barrel per day starting from May to help shore up plunging prices and curb oversupply.

Net profit fell to 62.48 billion riyals (\$16.64 billion) after zakat and tax for the quarter to March 31 from 83.29 billion a year earlier. Analysts had expected a profit of \$17.8 billion, according to the mean estimate from Egyptian investment bank EFG-Hermes, Saudi Arabia's Al-Rajhi Capital and Dubai-based Arqaam Capital.

Shares of Aramco were up 0.8 percent at 31.15 riyals at 0730 GMT, still trading below the IPO price of 32 riyals. The oil company, which went public last year, has said total dividends of \$13.4 billion were paid in the first quarter, in respect of the fourth quarter of 2019.

Dividends of \$18.75 billion for the first quarter of 2020 "are the highest of any listed company worldwide" and will

be paid in the second quarter, Aramco said. It gave no more details. The dividend payment is in line with its plan to pay a base dividend of \$75 billion for the year. Analysts were expecting a cut in the dividend to the Saudi government, but that the company was likely to maintain payouts to minority shareholders.

Aramco did not make any announcement on its future dividend policy, however.

Supply cut pact

Aramco said the results reflected "lower crude oil prices, as well as declining refining and chemicals margins and inventory re-measurement losses." "Looking ahead to the remainder of 2020, we expect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global energy demand and oil prices to weigh on our earnings," Aramco's CEO Amin Nasser said in a statement.

"We continue to reinforce the business during this period by reducing our capex and driving operational excellence. Longer term we remain confident that demand for energy will rebound as global economies recover," Aramco said it continues to expect capital spending for 2020 to be



Brent prices fell 65% in first quarter

between \$25 billion and \$30 billion. Capital expenditures for 2021 and beyond remain under review.

Capital expenditures in the first quarter were \$7.4 billion, compared to \$7.2 billion for the same period in 2019, "due to continued project development and upgrades at various facilities," Aramco said.

Aramco has kept its oil output at around 9.8 million barrels per day during the first three months of the year under an OPEC+ supply cut pact, before opening the oil taps in April after the collapse of earlier supply cut talks in early March.

Yousef Husseini, an analyst EFG Hermes, said there was

no change to the dividend policy in the first quarter, but he still expects the share of the dividend paid to the government will be reduced.

"They will cut the share of the government in the second quarter but there is some upside if they renegotiate the SABIC deal which could save them some cashflow," he said, adding that keeping the dividend policy unchanged buys Aramco some time to see how the global economic situation develops. Aramco's cash flows from operating activities, stood at \$22.4 billion in the first quarter, compared to \$24.5 billion in the same period of 2019, the company said.

Aramco's gearing - net debt divided by balance sheet capital - was minus 4.9 percent at the end of March, down from minus 0.2 percent at the end of 2019, reflecting the strength of the company's balance sheet. Aramco plans to acquire a stake in Saudi petrochemical maker SABIC for around \$70 billion, though sources told Reuters this week that the deal was likely to be restructured with the slump in oil prices due to the coronavirus.

It said earlier yesterday that its planned acquisition of a 70 percent equity stake in petrochemical maker SABIC is on track to close in the second quarter. — Reuters

US auto sector reopens as workers return to jobs

DETROIT: Factory workers began returning to assembly lines in Michigan on Monday, paving the way to reopen the US auto sector but stoking fears of a second wave of coronavirus infections as strict lockdowns are eased across the country.

With millions of Americans out of work and much of the economy at a virtual standstill, a growing number of states are relaxing tough restrictions on commerce and social life put in place to slow the outbreak.

Some auto suppliers in Michigan, a Midwest industrial powerhouse hard hit by the pandemic and its economic fallout, reopened plants on Monday with skeleton crews to get ready for a resumption of vehicle production next week.

Skilled-trades workers and salaried employees also began returning to auto assembly plants to prepare for the wider restart. "We're starting up our foundry this week in anticipation of the orders coming in next week," Joe Perkins, chief executive of Busche Performance Group, an engineering, casting

and machining firm, said in a telephone interview.

Factory workers will be issued face masks, checked for fever and required to submit health-screening questionnaires. "All of that's ready to go," Perkins said. "The big question is are people going to be buying cars and trucks."

Musk defies lockdown

The manufacturing reopening approved last week by Governor Gretchen Whitmer was crucial not only to auto plants in Michigan but to vehicle production elsewhere because so many key parts suppliers are based in and around the automaking hub of Detroit.

Detroit's Big Three automakers - General Motors Co, Ford Motor Co and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV - said last week they planned to restart production at North American plants on May 18. The target date was set after tacit approval from the powerful United Auto Workers union, which previously opposed a May restart as "too soon and too risky." Ford said it had adopted safety protocols from China, where car production resumed in late February, including personal protective garments on assembly lines, barriers separating employees clustered together and heavily sanitized work areas. Much is at stake. The auto sector accounts for 6 percent of US economic output and employs more than 835,000 Americans. — Reuters

Norway shatters wealth fund spending cap

OSLO: Norway will sharply raise spending this year from its one trillion-dollar sovereign wealth fund, exceeding a self-imposed cap for the first time in over a decade to aid an economy hobbled by the coronavirus pandemic. The withdrawal from the fund is projected to hit a record 419.6 billion crowns (\$40.6 billion), a revised budget from the finance ministry showed yesterday, up from 243.6 billion crowns forecast last October. The wealth fund - which invests proceeds from the country's oil industry in foreign stocks, bonds and property, - is worth about \$190,000 for every Norwegian man, woman and child. Annual withdrawals from it, known as the structural non-oil deficit, are capped at 3 percent of its value, though that can be exceeded in times of economic hardship.

Statistics Norway said on Tuesday the mainland economy contracted by 2.1 percent in March from February, and by 6.9 percent in the first quarter, bigger falls than preliminary readings reported on April 24.

Norway last exceeded the fund ceiling during the

2008-2009 financial crisis, withdrawing 4.1 percent at a time when the cap was set at 4.0 percent. It was lowered in 2017 to the current 3.0 percent to reflect lower expected future returns. This year's withdrawal will now reach 4.2 percent of the fund's Jan. 1 value rather than the originally planned 2.6 percent, the government said.

The extra spending will help to offset a tax shortfall and cover initiatives announced since a partial lockdown began on March 12, including extra unemployment benefits, cash support for companies and oil industry investment incentives, the finance ministry said.

As its rate of COVID-19 infection declines, Norway is gradually easing the curbs and will soon publish a long-term recovery plan. The ministry has predicted the economy will contract this year by 4.0 percent, and last week the central bank cut its key policy rate to zero percent for the first time.

The ministry also said it planned to introduce a new tax on its fish farming sector, the country's second-largest industry after oil production.

The tax, of 0.40 crowns per kilo of fish and payable from 2022, should raise some 500 million crowns for local and regional governments from 2022, the ministry predicted. Listed fish farmers include the world's largest, Mowi, Salmar and Leroy Seafood.

The crown currency initially weakened slightly following the budget and the GDP data, but traded slightly stronger at 11.13 per euro at 0732 GMT. — Reuters

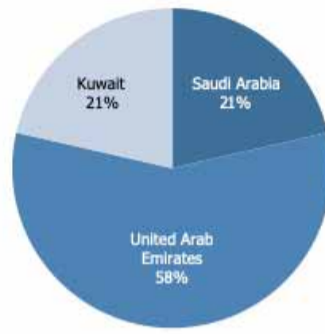
Business

GCC M&A transactions dropped in Q1 2020 by 51% due to COVID-19: Markaz

Financials, IT and Industrials sectors led transactions

KUWAIT: UAE's logistics sector led the top GCC M&A transactions during Q1 2020 as per a report recently issued by the Investment Banking Department at Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz". Port & Free Zone has announced its intention to acquire a 20percent stake in a fellow logistics company, DP World, for a total consid-

Evolutionary Systems Arabia, an IT-focused consulting firm, for a total consideration of \$65 million. Finally, Jazan Energy & Development Company (Jazan) announced that it has merged its international aquaculture unit with three local aquaculture companies. Under the terms of this deal, Jazan will own a 45percent stake worth \$60 million in Advanced Aquaculture Company (the merged entity).



Geographical Distribution by Number of Announced Pipeline Transactions (Q1 2020)

previous quarter in Q4 2019 as GCC acquirers accounted for 71percent of the total number of closed transactions while foreign acquirers accounted for 24 percent.

Overall, a majority of the GCC acquirers preferred acquiring local or GCC companies as opposed to acquiring foreign targets. The UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were the most active players in terms of local activity while the remaining acquirers each closed one transaction in their home countries. In addition, the UAE surpassed its GCC counterparts and reported seven closed transactions that involved foreign targets whereas Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia closed one transaction each. Lastly, neither Oman nor Qatar closed any transactions involving foreign targets.

Foreign buyers

In comparison to the previous quarter, the market attracted a significantly lower

level of interest from foreign buyers, which again, is in large part related to the global slowdown. Overall, there was only one transaction that closed that involved a foreign buyer, which is 92 percent lower relative to Q4 2019 and a decrease of 94 percent relative to Q1 2019. The one transaction that closed oversaw the Spanish company, Aqualia, acquire a 51percent stake in Qatarat Saqia Desalination Company Ltd. for an undisclosed amount.

Sectorial view

The transactions that closed throughout the quarter spanned across multiple sectors which was also observed in the previous quarter. With that being said, the sectors that witnessed the greatest level of activity throughout Q1 2020 were the

Financials, Information Technology and Industrials sector. These three sectors collectively accounted for almost 50percent of the total transactions that closed throughout the quarter. Lastly, the quarter recorded activity in three new sectors and they are the Aviation, Construction and Telecommunication Services sectors.

Pipeline deals

By the end of Q1 2020, there were a total of 14 announced transactions in the pipeline, which was the same as the previous quarter. Roughly 58percent of these transactions involved UAE targets while the remaining portion equally involved both Kuwaiti and Saudi targets. Neither Bahrain, Oman nor Qatar had announced any transactions throughout the quarter.

Sector-wise Classification of Deals – Q1 2020

| Sector | GCC Acquirers | Foreign Acquirers | Other* | Grand Total | % |
|-----------------------------|---------------|-------------------|----------|-------------|------------|
| Financials | 3 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 17 |
| Information Technology | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 17 |
| Industrials | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 13 |
| Consumer Staples | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8 |
| Healthcare | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8 |
| Media | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8 |
| Real Estate | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8 |
| Aviation | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Construction | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Education | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Telecommunications Services | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Utilities | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Grand Total | 22 | 1 | 1 | 24 | 100 |

*Other refers to deals where buyer information is not available.



Foreign buyers fall in Q1

eration of \$2.7 billion. It is worth noting that the firm currently holds 80percent of DP World's existing share capital.

The second largest transaction was taken on by Qatar Petroleum, who acquired a 25 percent stake in Qatar Fertilizer Company for a total consideration of \$1.0 billion. The next two transactions involved UAE buyers, both of whom fully acquired local companies. The first transaction oversaw Gulf Capital acquire 100percent of IVI-RMA Middle East for a total value of \$100 million. IVI-RMA Middle East is the fastest growing provider of fertility treatment services in the Middle East. The second transaction involved Mastek Arabia fully acquiring the Middle Eastern arm of

GCC M&A growth

According to Markaz's report, the number of closed M&A transactions in the GCC during Q1 2020 decreased by 51 percent relative to Q4 2019, and by 52 percent relative to Q1 2019. None of the GCC countries recorded a growth in the number of closed transactions relative to the previous quarter. It is worth noting that the GCC economy experienced a significant slowdown due to the global COVID-19 outbreak and the uncertainty the pandemic has caused. As such, this has significantly impacted the level of M&A activity throughout the quarter.

Acquirers and targets

A majority of the transactions completed during Q1 2020 and Q4 2019 were carried out by GCC acquirers. Of the total number of transactions closed during Q1 2020, GCC acquirers accounted for 92 percent while foreign acquirers accounted for 4 percent. The remaining 4 percent represents transactions for which the buyer information was not available. The market witnessed a similar pattern during the pre-



LONDON: An IMNG Airlines Airbus is pictured on the tarmac at London Heathrow Airport in west London, on Monday. — AFP

UK aviation faces crisis over quarantine

LONDON: Britain's aviation sector grappled Monday with news that international arrivals will soon face a 14-day quarantine to stop new infections of coronavirus, which has already ravaged travel demand worldwide.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the proposal late Sunday under a lockdown easing plan that seeks to avoid a second spike in COVID-19, after more than 32,000 deaths so far. Most international travellers will soon have to tell border officials where they will self-isolate for 14 days, or face quarantining in government-arranged accommodation, official guidance showed Monday.

COVID-19 has already ravaged the global economy and devastated the aviation sector, with airlines axing most flights in response to collapsing demand for air travel amid national lockdowns.

'Makes critical situation worse'

The quarantine—which will be introduced as soon as possible—sparked outcry from industry organizations Airlines UK and the Airport Operators Association (AOA). "As leaders of UK airlines and airports, we are writing to you to express our collective and serious concern and frustration about the proposed quarantine measure for UK inbound travellers," Airlines UK and the AOA said in an open letter to Johnson.

"An open-ended quarantine, with no set end date, will make an already critical situation for UK aviation, and all the businesses we support, even worse.

"People will simply choose not to travel to and from the UK, at the same time as economies in Europe and around the world begin opening up their borders and removing their own quarantines—making the UK aviation sector unable to compete. "In short, passenger travel cannot restart, and clarity from government is needed as to whether such an outcome is the intention or expectation of this measure." They also requested an "urgent" meeting with the government and revealed that they had not yet been consulted.

"Grounding airlines indefinitely will

further exacerbate an already devastating economic impact on UK aviation, prolonging the revenue crisis and delaying even further the start of a recovery for a sector that supports over 1.5 million UK jobs."

Heathrow traffic evaporates

Earlier Monday, fresh evidence emerged of the devastating impact on London's Heathrow airport, which is usually Europe's biggest air hub by passenger numbers. Heathrow airport, which is situated west of the British capital, revealed in a statement that the number of passengers nosedived 97 percent in April from the same month in 2019 to just 200,000. That was the same amount of travellers that normally fly through the hub in a normal day prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, while the airport only provided services for essential travel like repatriation. "Aviation is the lifeblood of this country's economy, and until we get Britain flying again, UK business will be stuck in third gear," said Heathrow chief executive John Holland-Kaye, who was also a signatory on the letter.

"The government needs to urgently lay out a roadmap for how they will reopen borders once the disease has been beaten, and to take an immediate lead in agreeing a common international standard for health in aviation that will allow passengers who don't have the infection to travel freely."

Heathrow, which is owned by a consortium led by Spanish construction giant Ferrovial, added that the 14-day quarantine plan will effectively close borders temporarily. British Airways' owner IAG had warned last week that pre-crisis passenger demand would not return until 2023 at the earliest.

IAG Chief Executive Willie Walsh—who was not a signatory on the letter—said on Monday that the quarantine announcement had been a surprise. "It's a very severe, very significant crisis," Walsh also told the parliamentary Transport Select Committee in a hearing on virus-hit demand for air travel. "The announcement of a 14 day (quarantine) is definitely going to make it worse. We will have to review the impact of that." In a separate development, Richard Branson's Virgin Group conglomerate unveiled plans Monday to sell \$500 million of shares in space tourism company Virgin Galactic to help bolster Virgin Atlantic, which cut more than 3,000 jobs last week to save money. — AFP

IMF approves \$2.77bn crisis aid for Egypt

WASHINGTON/CAIRO: The International Monetary Fund on Monday said its executive board approved \$2.77 billion in emergency financing to help Egypt grapple with the new coronavirus pandemic that has brought tourism to a standstill and triggered major capital flight.

The IMF said it remained closely engaged with the Egyptian government and the Central Bank of Egypt, and stood ready to provide further support as needed. IMF First Deputy Managing Director Geoffrey Okamoto said Egypt would need "additional expeditious support" from multilateral and bilateral creditors to close its remaining balance of payments gap, ease the adjustment burden, and preserve Egypt's hard-won macroeconomic stability.

Egypt's Health Ministry reported 346 new cases of the novel coronavirus on Monday, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 9,746, including 533 deaths.

The outbreak has led to the shutdown of Egypt's tourism sector, a key source of foreign revenue, and threatens income from the Suez Canal and remittances from Egyptian workers based abroad. Egypt's foreign reserves have fallen to \$37 billion from more than \$45.5 billion at the end of February.

The government has taken steps to contain the outbreak, including introduction of a night curfew and the closure of cafes and mosques, but has stopped short of imposing a full lockdown as it seeks to keep the economy going. The IMF said Egypt had carried out a successful economic program before the outbreak of COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus, achieving a "remarkable turnaround" in its large external and domestic imbalances.

The new funds would help Egyptian authorities continue spending on health, social protection, and supporting the most impacted sectors and vulnerable groups, while limiting the decline in international reserves, Okamoto said. He said Egyptian authorities were committed to full transparency and accountability on crisis-related spending, and had agreed to publish information on procurement plans and awarded contracts, and carry out audits of such spending.

As the crisis abated, it would be important for Egypt to resume measures to lower its debt level and continue implementation of structural reforms, he said. — Reuters

China cuts Australian beef imports

BEIJING: China suspended imports from four major Australian beef suppliers yesterday, just weeks after Beijing's ambassador warned of a consumer boycott in retaliation for Canberra's push to probe the origins of the coronavirus.

Analysts said the move raised concerns of a possible standoff between Australia and its most important trading partner that could

spill over into other crucial sectors as it struggles to navigate the disease-induced economic crisis. Federal Trade Minister Simon Birmingham said shipments of meat from four abattoirs had been suspended over "minor technical" breaches related to Chinese health and labelling certificate requirements.

"We are concerned that the suspensions appear to be based on highly technical issues, which in some cases date back more than a year," he added. "We will work with industry and authorities in both Australia and China to seek to find a solution that allows these businesses to resume their normal operations as soon as possible."

The four abattoirs account for around 35

percent of Australia's beef exports to China in a trade worth about Aus\$1.7 billion (US\$1.1 billion), according to national broadcaster ABC. Beijing has also flagged major tariffs on Australian barley over allegations it is dumping the grain in China—selling it for less than it costs to produce. The Australian Financial Review cited confidential documents as saying Beijing is considering duties of 73.6 percent.

Tensions between the two have increased since Australia started calling for an independent investigation into the origin of the coronavirus outbreak, which began in China before spreading around the world, killing more than 280,000, infecting millions and shattering the global economy.—AFP

flydubai continues to focus on cargo operations

KUWAIT: In line with the updated Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) issued by the General Civil Aviation Authority (GCAA), Dubai-based flydubai's passenger operation remains suspended until Thursday 04 June 2020 as part of the precautionary measures being implemented in response to COVID-19. The carrier continues to focus its efforts on supporting government requests with repatriation flights and enabling the movement of essential goods across its network and beyond.

Since the directive came into effect on 24 March 2020, flydubai has enabled the movement of more than 1,651,929 kgs of perishables, medical supplies, express courier and essential goods. flydubai Cargo operated 101 flights, to 26 countries, utilizing six of the carrier's Next-Generation Boeing 737-800 aircraft which have been allocated to operate as all-cargo flights.

Hamad Obaidalla, Chief Commercial Officer at flydubai, said: "air cargo operations will continue to be our focus over the next few weeks. We have been working closely with our strategic partners enabling flydubai to transport cargo seamlessly to where it is needed the most, while adhering to the safety standards set by the industry and the World Health Organization (WHO)."

flydubai Cargo is maximizing its cargo capacity by transporting goods in the cargo hold on repatriation flights as well. The carrier obtained government approvals to operate 90 special repatri-

ation flights over the past few weeks. More than 12,532 passengers were able to return to their homes across 19 countries thanks to the efforts and collaboration of embassies and government authorities.



Hamad Obaidalla

These repatriation flights operated to: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Croatia, Egypt, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Somaliland, Sudan, Thailand and the United Kingdom. While flydubai will continue to operate more cargo-only flights during this period, repatriation flights will be subject to government approvals and passengers are encouraged to check directly with their embassies for more information as well as flydubai.com.

flydubai received over 187,000 enquiries since March and has allocated a dedicated team to support with customer care. flydubai has not cancelled all flights in its schedule and the cancellations are being made in line with the published NOTAMs.



Business

Mezzan Holding holds 19th AGM

Shareholders approve cash dividend of 15 fils per share

KUWAIT: Mezzan Holding KSCP, one of the largest manufacturers and distributors of food, beverage, FMCG and healthcare products in the region, held its 19th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of shareholders on Monday where shareholders approved the board of directors' recommendation of distributing cash dividend of 15 fils per share.

In 2019, Mezzan recorded healthy growth in operational metrics such as Revenue, Gross Profit, Operating Profit, and Earnings before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortization (EBITDA).

These were driven by its fast-moving consumer goods and healthcare sectors, as well as the food services sector, and food manufacturing and distribution.

2019 was also a milestone year as Mezzan inked two key transactions, the first was the acquisition of 67 percent stake in Kuwait Saudi Pharmaceutical Company, and the other being a Joint Venture for the distribution of medical devices in Kuwait under the brands of Medtronics and Covidien.

During 2019, the group recorded non-cash and non-recurring losses for an aggregate value of KD 2.4 million, relating to impairment of goodwill in an investment in a subsidiary in Saudi Arabia for approximately KD 1.2 million and an impairment of other intangible assets driven by reclassification of a property resulting from the application of IFRS 16 (which started in 2019) and IAS38.

Mezzan Holding Executive Vice Chairman Mohammad Jassim Al-Wazzan said: 'I would like to thank the group's employees and workers who are working around the clock now to secure food and medicine under the current circumstances'.

He added '2019 witnessed the expansion of Mezzans scale and scope in the healthcare market which now includes production of pharmaceutical products, a key component of consumer spending.

He concluded 'Mezzan was also successful in enhancing its revenue and operational profits but net profit was reduced due to non-cash non-recurring losses (impairment of intangible assets).

FY 2019 Financial Highlights:

- 2019 Revenue: KD 222.5 million, up 7.2 percent
 - 2019 Gross Profit: KD 48.7million, up 10.7 percent
 - 2019 EBITDA: KD 18.5 million, up 18.5 percent
 - 2019 Net Profit: KD 5.6 million, down 19.0 percent
- FY 2019 Balance Sheet Highlights:**
- 2019 Assets KD 260.3 million
 - Shareholders' Equity to owners of parent company KD 105.6 million

FY 2019 Financial Performance Review:

Food Business Line:

Total Revenue for the Food Business Line reached KD 160.4 million, a steady increase of 3.4 percent compared with the same period in 2018.

The Food Business Line accounted for 72.1 percent of Group Revenue. The Business Line comprises the following three divisions: Manufacturing and Distribution (generating 48.4 percent of Group Revenue), Catering (generating 16.0 percent of Group Revenue) and Services (generating 7.8 percent of Group Revenue).

- Manufacturing and Distribution: Revenue increased 5.8 percent.
- Catering: FY Revenue decreased by 6.1 percent.
- Services: FY Revenue increased by 10.8 percent.



KUWAIT: Mezzan Holding Executive Vice Chairman Mohammad Jassim Al-Wazzan addresses the AGM

Non-Food Business Line:

Revenue reached KD 62.0 million, an increase of 18.9 percent compared with the same period in 2018. The Non-Food Business Line accounted for 27.9 percent of Group Revenue.

The Business Lines comprises the following divisions: FMCG and healthcare business division (generating 25.6 percent of Group Revenue) and Industrials (generating 2.3 percent).

- FMCG and Pharmaceuticals: FY Revenue increased by 21.9 percent.
- Industrials: FY Industrials revenues decreased by 6.9 percent.

Regional Business Highlights:

- In Kuwait: FY Revenue grew by 6.9 percent due to strong performance in FMCG and

Catering

- In UAE: FY Revenue increased by 8.4 percent.

In Qatar: FY Revenue grew by 5.1 percent driven by resolving supply chain issues as well as continued strong performance from catering.

In KSA: FY Revenue declined by 13.5 percent as supply of chips were rerouted to Qatar and facing delay in inaugurating the new extruder manufacturing line, which came on line in the last quarter of 2018.

In Afghanistan: FY Revenue increased by 23.1 percent due to increased sales in the fruits and vegetables business.

- In Jordan: FY Revenue decreased by 3.3 percent
- In Iraq: FY Revenue increased by 14.3 percent.



Mezzan inks 2 transactions in 2019

Shamal Az-Zour Al-Oula listing

KUWAIT: Shamal Az-Zour Al-Oula Power and Water Company K.S.C (Public) (the 'Company') is pleased to announce that it has received the approval from the Capital Markets Authority to list its shares on Bursa Kuwait's Premier Market.

The Company is currently working with Bursa Kuwait to provide the necessary documents required to complete the listing procedures, as stipulated by the rules of the Boursa.

The Company is closely monitoring the Boursa market conditions, especially with regard to the effects of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic on global capital markets, and taking into consideration the best interests of its shareholders, the Company is planning to select an appropriate date to be the first listing day, by which time the market conditions are expected to have stabilized, which will help the Company's shareholders and potential investors to make informed investment decisions.

CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced the most recent issues of CBK bonds and related Tawarruq at a total value of KD 160 million for 6 months with a rate of return at 1.375 percent.

Venezuela's timid gains in taming inflation fade

CARACAS: Venezuela's modest advances in taming inflation since last year are being wiped out by chronic fuel shortages and a plummeting exchange rate, driving food prices up amid the coronavirus pandemic, according to economists, lawmakers and industry leaders. After peaking in 2018 at 1.8 million percent, inflation slowed last year as President Nicolas Maduro eased socialist economic controls, helping keep monthly consumer price increases below 30 percent in February and March.

But with a lack of fuel making it difficult to deliver goods and the bolivar depreciating some 60 percent in 2020, consumer prices rose 80 percent in April, the opposition-controlled National Assembly said on Monday, meaning interannual inflation was 4.210 percent. Shoppers on the streets say prices for some goods are doubling in a matter of weeks.

'Everything is rising so quickly that what I deposit in my account doesn't buy anything,' said Diocelina Ospina, 67, a maid shopping in the city of Maracay who bought only 200 grams (0.45 pounds) of cheese because its price had jumped 40 percent in a week.

'All we can do is eat less and stretch what we have.' Inflation data in Venezuela is largely based on figures released by the opposition-run Congress, because the central bank publishes official data with several months of delay. The 'Petare basket,' an informal index named for the sprawling east end of Caracas that measures the price of eight basic food items, has jumped 109 percent since mid-March, according to the legislature. —Reuters

Alphabet soup of recovery scenarios

PARIS: What will the economic recovery from the coronavirus crisis look like in different countries? Economists have taken to using letters to describe the shape of potential recoveries ... or stagnation.

U, V, W, and L-shaped recoveries all describe a brutal drop in economic activity since the coronavirus struck China at the beginning of the year. From there they outline different scenarios of how what the IMF has called the worst recession since the Great Depression could play out.

The hoped for U-turn

After the plunge provoked by the lockdown orders, economic activity slides into a trough for a period. That is due to sectors such as tourism and entertainment being more durably hit and requiring more time to adjust. But a recovery then gradually takes hold, before accelerating sharply.

The IMF saw this as a possible scenario for the world's advanced economies, which have been hit the

worst. In its updated forecasts released last month it sees them recovering much if not all of the drops suffered this year. But such a recovery will depend on the absence of a severe second wave of the epidemic that would force countries to reimpose lockdowns.

V an unlikely version

A V-shaped recovery is the best: a sharp drop followed immediately by a correspondingly sharp recovery. The government-paid leave programs in some countries that have kept people formally employed are aimed at supporting such a recovery as workers will have income to spend. But the longer lockdowns and the crisis last, the less likely such a version becomes.

That doesn't mean that you can't hope: the Bank of England expects a 14 percent contraction in the economy with a 15 percent rebound next year. The IMF sees a V-shape recovery for emerging and developing countries overall, with a 1.0 percent drop followed by 6.6 percent rebound.

W for (second) wave

A brief recovery followed by a relapse before a sustained return to growth is not unusual. This was the experience of the eurozone following the global financial crisis in 2008. A



gradual recovery was cut short as investors began to worry about the debt levels of Greece, Italy and Spain.

Economists see a W-shaped recovery as likely if a strong second-wave of the coronavirus forces countries to adopt strict lockdown measures once again.

L for lethargic

This would be the worst possible outcome as it describes a failure to recover from the crisis. After a plunge in output an economy stagnates. In this case it would mean a wave of bankruptcies followed by a long peri-

od of widespread unemployment. Such steps down in economic output are not unheard of—think of Japan's lost decade that began in the early 1990s when falling prices kept the economy from growing.

Swoosh: Just (don't) do it

Think of the swoosh logo of US footwear firm Nike - a drop followed a long, gradual return higher. This is a scenario many advanced countries could follow as the IMF is already forecasting that their growth next year will fail to fully compensate for the falls they suffer this year. —AFP

Argentina to extend \$65bn debt deadline

BUENOS AIRES/LONDON/NEW YORK: Argentina will extend negotiations over a \$65 billion debt restructuring proposal until May 22, the government said on Monday, setting the stage for tense last-ditch talks as the South American nation races to avoid default.

The new deadline, which comes after an initial cut-off passed on Friday without the support needed for a comprehensive deal, means the offer will expire the same day Argentina could trigger default over a \$500 million interest payment.

The major grains producer is racing to revamp unsustainable debts amid a painful recession, high inflation and increasingly expensive borrowing costs as concerns over a potential ninth sovereign default have rattled investors and hit bond prices. The talks so far have been complex, with three major creditor groups rejecting the initial proposal and pushing for improved terms. Argentine officials have said the country cannot afford to pay more, though they are open to counterproposals.

'Clearly, both sides are playing hardball,' Capital Economics said in a note on Monday, adding that the talks were likely to drag on and that creditors could face large haircuts, especially with the global coronavirus pandemic sapping growth. 'The government is facing ever-growing demands on its purse as the health crisis continues,' it said. 'Accordingly, recovery rates for foreign bondholders of around 30 percent are looking increasingly likely.' Analysts calculate that the current offer, which includes a three-year payment halt, a large cut to coupon payments and maturities pushed back to 2030 and beyond

amounts to a net present value of around 30-35 percent. Bondholders say this needs to be raised to gain support.

Distressed levels

Argentina's Economy Ministry said in the official gazette that it had extended the deadline to 'increase participation' after taking stock of the current offer. The government has not said what exact level of support that offer garnered.

'While many of our bondholders supported Argentina's invitation, other significant groups of creditors did not,' the ministry said in a statement, adding that the government remained open to discussing the way forward.

'Among those that rejected Argentina's offer, several have indicated that there are better alternatives that can be reconciled with the objectives that this administration has set for itself and for the Argentine people.' The invitation closes on May 22 at 5 p.m. New York time (2100 GMT). The results of the offer will be announced around May 25 with a settlement date of May 27.

The bonds in question include collective action clauses, which means the government needs to meet a threshold of investor support in order to move ahead with comprehensive restructuring.

Argentina's bonds, which have fallen steeply since the middle of last year, are already trading at distressed levels, with most around 25-30 cents on the dollar. The country's bonds have edged up in recent days and rose 1.2 percent on average on Monday.

Level of acceptance

Goldman Sachs said in a note that without a deal, it was likely Argentina would default on May 22, though it did not rule out payment if a deal looked close at hand. The investment bank noted the signs were that participation had been low. 'The absence of specific official information suggests that the initial acceptance rate may



BUENOS AIRES: In this file photo Argentina's Economy Minister Martin Guzman delivers a press conference at Casa Rosada in Buenos Aires.—AFP

have been quite low,' it said. Two international bondholders involved in the talks said the level of acceptance was just over 12 percent. Argentine media reported that local holders of the debt had been more receptive, which they said brought the total level to around 20 percent.

Argentina's economy ministry and minister Martin Guzman declined to comment on the level of acceptance. The country's largest province, Buenos Aires, is facing a separate debt crisis of its own, with an offer to holders of its foreign law bonds to restructure around \$7 billion in debt due to expire later on Monday.

A major creditor group has already rejected the proposal from the province, which also faces bond repayments on Monday, which if missed could trigger a local government default. Siobhan Morden at Amherst Pierpont said the Buenos Aires talks could give a clue to how national negotiations would go.

'The firm deadline for today in the Province of Buenos Aires will provide a leading indicator for the sovereign since the two credits are aligned on their political strategy,' she said. —Reuters

Coronavirus lockdowns could spark rise in HIV infections, experts warn

WASHINGTON: If lockdowns and stay-at-home orders are succeeding in slowing the spread of the coronavirus, health experts warn that the measures could unintentionally undermine efforts to contain another potentially deadly disease: HIV. At the start of April, Travis Sanchez, an epidemiologist at Emory University, carried out an online survey of around 1,000 men who have sex with men, and half of them reported a drop in the number of sexual partners, as well as reduced use of hook-up apps. In theory, this should reduce transmission.

But he quickly added a disturbing warning: a quarter of the men said they had experienced problems getting tested for sexually transmitted diseases, because thousands of centers that used to provide them have closed down. That means that those people still having sex have no idea about their status, which Sanchez warned is a potential ticking bomb. "It's very likely that people's risk behaviors will resume before they will have full access to prevention services," he said. "And I think that combination could lead to increases in HIV transmission."

The full impact of the pandemic on HIV transmission will not be known before next year, when the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) publishes its statistics on 2020 infections. But numerous experts and healthcare professionals fear a step backward, a year after the United States announced the goal of cutting the number of new infections by 75 percent by the year 2025. In Washington, a city that has been hit hard by HIV, the Whitman-Walker clinic has had to stop its daily walk-in tests for the virus and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia. Around 50 people used to come in every day to get tested, including many gay people,



NEW YORK: In this file photo a man takes a free HIV test during the Harlem Pride parade in New York City on June 29, 2019. — AFP

and for many it had become a routine check-up carried out every three months.

"All those folks are going without testing," said nurse practitioner Amanda Cary, who now only sees symptomatic patients by appointment. "I do think there's going to be a rise in STIs," she said. The CDC told AFP it was expecting a drop in the number of STIs being diagnosed in the short term, "but an increase in the long-term once restrictions lift and more people are screened and tested again." It

said that for HIV, "the decrease in the availability of testing and limited access to treatment and prevention services may result in more infections and poor health outcomes in the long run."

Everything can change

In San Francisco, Doctor Matthew Spinelli worries about the homeless, or those who lack the connectivity to take part in the televisits that have replaced in-person visits to health centers. "People

are just scared of a hospital right now, so I'm pretty worried," said Spinelli, who practices at the city's largest hospital. His clinic is also following some 3,000 people living with HIV. He fears that in the chaos of the pandemic, some of them are not going to pharmacies or taking their daily medication, which could allow their viral load to shoot up and make the patients to become contagious again.

"I'm worried that their mental health or substance use may be worsening in this environment and hence their pill taking adherence is worse," he told AFP. In the United States, the use of the preventive daily pill PrEP, which allows those who take it to be almost 100 percent risk-free from contracting HIV during unprotected sex, has increased, but Spinelli reports that some have stopped taking it during the lockdown. Which leads to the question: will they start again afterwards? "On the balance it is probably going to worsen the HIV epidemic, that would be my prediction, both in this country, and worldwide," Spinelli said. But by forcing healthcare professionals to improvise, the pandemic will also bring about other lasting, positive changes in prevention strategies.

Telemedicine will become commonplace, for one thing. Needle exchange programs are already handing out more syringes at one time, and even shipping them out by mail. The use of home HIV test kits, which have been around for years but have been under-utilized, will spread, said Stephen Lee, director of Nastad, an association of public health officials who specialize in HIV. The CDC is pushing home-testing, and both Florida and Tennessee are considering implementing it, he told AFP. "The pandemic has shown us that we can and should do it," he said.—AFP

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Gigi Hadid wants 'several kids'

The 25-year-old model is currently expecting her first child with her boyfriend Zayn Malik, and it has now been claimed the pair are keen to expand their brood in the future, as Gigi has always wanted to have more than one child. An insider said: "Gigi is young but always said she wants several kids. She's sensitive and nurturing and will be a great mum." And whilst Zayn, 27, and Gigi have had their "ups and downs" as a couple - with the pair previously ending their romance on more than one occasion - they are "thrilled" about starting their next chapter as parents. The source told People magazine: "They've been through their ups and downs, but neither stopped caring about the other. They've jumped on the timing of having a baby and are preparing for their new lives." Gigi confirmed her pregnancy last week after rumors had surfaced a few days prior, and said she is "very excited" to become a mother. She said: "Obviously, we wished we could have announced it on our own terms but we're

very excited and happy and grateful for everyone's well wishes and support. Especially during this time, it's a nice silver lining to be able to be home and be together and really experience it day by day." It has also been reported Gigi and the 'Pillowtalk' hitmaker are expecting a baby girl, though the couple have not confirmed the speculation. Before the duo could speak about the news themselves, Gigi's mother Yolanda Hadid revealed she is set to become a grandmother as she said the family are "so excited" to welcome the impending arrival. Yolanda said last week: "Still shocked our little secret got leaked to the press. Of course we are so excited. I'm excited to become Oma in September especially after I lost my mom so recently. "But this is the beauty of life, one soul leaves us and a new one comes in. We feel very blessed."

Katy Perry: Self-isolation has been a good test for my relationship



Katy Perry says the coronavirus lockdown has been a good test for her romance with Orlando Bloom. The 35-year-old singer is expecting her first child with her fiancé Orlando, and has said self-isolating at home with the actor has helped them form a closer bond than ever before, as it has forced them to realize they "can't hide anything" from each other. Speaking on Instagram Live, she said: "If you love me during quarantine, you can love me any other time. Quarantine probably reveals the most about you." And she then jokingly added: "I mean, you can't even hide your foot fungus anymore. It is just out there. I used to have it, but I don't have it anymore. But you can't hide anything. ... This is me, this is it." The 'Never Worn White' hitmaker isn't having the best time in quarantine though, as she recently revealed she has been unable to satisfy her pregnancy cravings during the global health crisis, as she can't get out to the store to buy the products she wants. She said: "I think it's one of those things where usually in the past you hear stories of a pregnant woman craving something and the husband or fiancé goes and rushes to the grocery store at two in the morning. "There's no rushing to the grocery store! It's like, 'Do you really want that watermelon, do you really need that orange, do you really need that pickle? Or do you want to risk your life for a pickle?' " Despite the obvious difficulties, Katy insisted she is still "grateful for so much". She added: "Things are going very well, all things considered. I'm just grateful for so much and taking it one day at a time."

Sevigny revealed her newborn baby's name

Chloe Sevigny has revealed her newborn baby is a boy named Vanja. The 45-year-old actress welcomed her first child with her partner Sinisa Mackovic over the weekend, and she has now shared more details about the new arrival, including his gender and name. Posting the first image of her son on Instagram, Chloe wrote: "Welcome to the world 'Vanja Sevigny Mackovic'. "Born May 2nd New York City". "Thank you to all the staff at "Mt. Sinai East for your bravery, perseverance and kindness, especially the nurses for being so gentle and patient. "Blessings to all the other families giving birth during this time. "#iloveboys (sic)". A representative for the 'Lizzie' actress revealed this week that both mother and baby are "happy and healthy", and the birth of the tot comes just over a week after Chloe revealed she was due to give birth in May. She said in April: "Our baby's due in eight days and we don't have a name yet." The 'Boys Don't Cry' star confessed she was feeling "distressed" that social distancing guidelines imposed due to the coronavirus pandemic meant she'd have to give birth alone. New York Presbyterian hospitals announced: "At this time, no visitors including birthing partners and support persons are permitted for obstetric patients. "We understand that this will be difficult for our patients and their loved ones, but we believe that this is a necessary step to promote the safety of our new mothers and children." In response to the news, Chloe wrote on Instagram: "#pregnantincoronatime I hope all expecting families are finding some calm. Today's news in NY was very distressing for all. #support #prayers (sic)" The policy was later changed.



Legend wants to 'spread love' amid coronavirus pandemic

John Legend wants to help "spread some love" amid the coronavirus pandemic. The 'All of Me' hitmaker has said the global health crisis has been an "interesting time for musicians", as although he would love to head out on tour and perform on stage, he has learned how to "connect" with people in new ways, such as putting on at-home concerts through livestreams. He said: "Well, it's an interesting time for musicians. So much of what we do requires other people being around, and as much as we want to connect to people it's not as easy to do it this way as it would be otherwise, but we're trying to make the most of it and we've been trying to help people get through this time by giving them some music, some inspiration, spreading some love. "We're just hoping everybody stays safe and stays healthy, and we all get through this, and then we can go back to getting together for concerts and doing all the things that we love doing with our audiences." And whilst his world has changed amid the pandemic, the 'Tonight' singer admits he's happy to



spend more time at home with his wife Chrissy Teigen and their two children, four-year-old Luna and 23-month-old Miles. He added: "Yeah, the kids, I think they love it. They're so used to daddy going to the studio or daddy going to film 'The Voice', or going away for a couple of days and do some shows. "I think they love that I'm home so much and that mum is home much too, so they're loving it. I like to work and I like to go away to write, and I like to go away to record and do all the things that I do for a living, but we're just waiting until the time is right for that to happen again, and in the meantime, I really am enjoying hanging out with the kids. We're having a good time." With his increased time at home, the 41-year-old musician has been indulging in his passion for cooking. Speaking to Zane Lowe for Apple Music's Beats 1 radio, he said: "Oh, I can cook all over the place. I'm good on the griddle and the grill and I can do whatever I need to do. I don't make up a lot of recipes, but I'm good at following a recipe and executing very well. Then occasionally I'll write my own recipe. Well, nothing you know, invented. It's just my own variation. Like I have my own fried chicken, I have my own mac and cheese that I make."

Consuelos once jumped on a plane to catch his wife being 'unfaithful'

Mark Consuelos once took a flight from Boston to New York because he thought his wife Kelly Ripa was being unfaithful. The 49-year-old actor has admitted he used to struggle with jealousy during the early days of his marriage to TV host Kelly, and says he once went as far as getting on a plane so he could turn up at her apartment to try and catch her in the act of cheating on him. Writing in new book 'What Makes a Marriage Last' - an excerpt of which was published by People magazine - he wrote: "After we were married, I was doing a show in Boston, and I couldn't get a hold of her all day. We didn't have cell phones then. I got a really bad feeling. So I got on a flight to New York and called her from the plane and asked her what she was doing that night." And sharing her own side of the story, Kelly revealed her husband even faked a flower delivery so that she'd let him into her home. She recalled: "Apparently he thought that sounded very fishy. He wanted to catch me. So he gets home and tells the doorman to call up to the apartment and tell me there's a flower delivery. I'm excited because I'm thinking, 'Oh my gosh, he's sending me flowers!' "Meanwhile, I have a johnny mop in one hand, and I'm wearing a bathrobe. So I open the door, and it's him. He comes in - he doesn't even say hello. He's looking for something. I'm still looking for the flower guy! And he's sweeping the scene!" The 'Riverdale' star quickly discovered his spouse wasn't being unfaithful, and has since learned a valuable lesson about jealousy and trust. He added: "[It] feels horrible and you know you're wrong... I'm less jealous these days."



NIKKI BELLA wasn't ready for a baby at first

Nikki Bella wasn't ready for a baby when she learned she was pregnant. The 36-year-old retired professional wrestler is currently expecting her first child with her fiancé Artem Chigvintsev, but has confessed that when she first realized her period was two weeks late, she "didn't want to be pregnant". In a preview clip for Thursday's episode of 'Total Bellas', Nikki and Artem are seen getting into an argument when the dancer, 37, believes she is flirting with another man, and one week later, Nikki discovers her period is late. Speaking about the potential pregnancy, Nikki says in a confessional: "It's only been about a week since we got into our big argument, and honestly, this is just ... this is way too fast. I have so many things going for me. And right now, to think, getting pregnant, what it would do to my life, it would completely change it. For me, it is so important to make sure Artem and I have this amazing, solid relationship and that we are ready to be parents - if that day ever comes." Nikki then goes to speak to her mother, Kathy Colace, to ask if being "two weeks late" is a bad thing, to which she tells her daughter to make sure her romance is in a good place. Kathy says in the teaser: "I hope you and Artem are doing really good because this will throw just another curveball into your relationship." And when the 'Incomparable' author says she hasn't told Artem yet, Kathy adds: "Oh, my God. You kids stress me." Nikki then reveals she isn't sure she wants a baby, as she replies: "Mum, how do you think I feel? I do not want to be pregnant." Since the episode was filmed, Nikki has told Artem and her fans the happy news, and the pair can't wait to become first time parents.

Tamara Falco is set to become a Marquess

Enrique Iglesias' half-sister Tamara Falco is set to become a Marquess. The 38-year-old socialite - who is the daughter of Isabel Preysler, the ex-wife of Julio Iglesias - has been given the title of Marquess of Grinon, following the tragic death of her father Carlos Falco, who passed away in March due to complications related to coronavirus. Carlos held the title of the 5th Marquess of Grinon, and the title was officially passed down to Tamara in Carlos' will. According to jHOLA!, Carlos' eldest son Manuel Falco recently returned to Spain from London for a reading of the will, which saw him inherit another of Carlos' titles - the Marquisate of Castel-Moncaayo - which also gives him the consideration of Great of Spain. Tamara's choice for the title of Marquess of Grinon comes as a surprise, and the Spanish designer has said she "didn't expect" this decision but is "very happy" about it. The title was also used by Carlos for his winery and oils. Meanwhile,

Tamara previously took to Instagram to pay tribute to her father following his death on March 20, where she described him as "good and generous with his children and friends". In a post written in her native Spanish, she wrote: "From the Falco family we want to thank all the people who have shown us so much love and support in recent weeks. In particular, we would like to thank the doctors, healthcare professionals of the Jiménez Diaz Foundation and the Quiron group for the attention and care that our father received from the time he entered until his death. "Our Father was an exceptional person, who loved his country and worked tirelessly for it, as a farmer and wine producer, and importing technologies that modernized the national industry. He was an idealist, good and generous with his children and friends, and will always be alive in our memory. "Manolo, Sandra, Tamara, Duarte and Aldara."—Bang Showbiz



Lifestyle | Features



A woman looks at a mural of a health worker with wings holding a globe on International Nurses Day in Melbourne yesterday. As frontline hospital staff are constantly facing the risks from the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak, the world is marking International Nurses Day, celebrated around the world every May 12, the anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth.—AFP

Safety screening: Czech cinemas open with new virus rules in place

After two months under a coronavirus lockdown in the Czech Republic, 16-year-old Tomas Fohler was eager to go to the movies — a novel outing that now comes with new rules in a world gripped by a pandemic. “We wanted to see what it’s like just to go and see a film with my friends again,” the teen told AFP before settling in for a Czech film with two pals in Prague. “We’ll sit further from each other, in a single row, and we’ll probably shout at each other,” he joked, wearing a face mask which is now required in all public places.



People wearing face masks watch a film in a cinema on Monday in Prague.—AFP

Live classical music to return in London... at a distance

One of Britain's leading classical music venues yesterday announced a program of live concerts as the country eases out of lockdown measures, featuring virtuosos such as pianist Mitsuko Uchida. A total of 20 concerts lasting up to an hour each will be broadcast live on BBC radio and on livestream around the world from June 1 from the Wigmore Hall in central London. But the venue stressed that strict social distancing measures would remain in place, as it partially re-opens for the first time since the lockdown began in late March. Some of the world's leading musicians will perform solo recitals or as a duo without an audience, and with only a maximum of four staff, including a sound engineer, present.

New government guidelines published on Monday envisage “cultural and sporting events to take place behind closed-doors for broadcast” from next month. But they stipulate they can only take place without the risk of “large-scale social contact”. Wigmore Hall director John Gilhooly said the concerts would take place “under the strictest possible conditions”. “The health and safety of our staff and the musicians will always be Wigmore Hall’s foremost concern,” he added in a statement. Music venues, theatres, museums and art galleries across Britain were all ordered to shut, and annual festivals were cancelled, as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

Last month the Creative Industries Federation representative body warned the government Britain could become a “cultural wasteland” without urgent financial help. More support was needed for self-employed actors and performers unable to access government rescue plans, and venues at risk from a lack of revenue, it said. It cited research that one in seven organizations had reserves to last until the end of April, and only half had resources to last beyond June. BBC Radio 3 is the corporation's classical music channel. Its controller, Alan Davey, said the absence of live music had affected musicians unable to play and audiences at home. “It’s a great joy to restore this service to the nation whilst also ensuring maximum health and safety,” he added. The first concert on June 1 will be a piano recital by Stephen Hough. Other performers include pianist Mitsuko Uchida, and opera singers Iestyn Davies and Mark Padmore.—AFP

The theatre — which requires all guests to sit two meters (over six feet) apart — is among the first to open in Europe, where strict lockdowns have hemmed in huge swathes of the population for weeks on end. The Czech Republic is joining several countries in easing some restrictions, allowing citizens out of the house for simple activities that now feel unfamiliar. But many businesses, the cinema included, did not receive a rush of customers, even with new safety measures now on the menu. Fohler and his friends were the only three ticket holders at Monday morning's screening, and all seats remained empty for the next two showings.

Other theatres in the country opted to keep their doors shut, waiting instead for other lockdown restrictions to be lifted. The Czech Republic is not the first country to allow moviegoers back to the big screen. Some cinemas have opened in Norway, also asking guests to respect social distancing measures, with several theatres limiting the number of guests to 50.

‘Strange to be back’

Museums, galleries, theatres and cinemas were among the first businesses to shut down in Europe as governments rolled out strict lockdown measures to stave off the fast-spreading coronavirus outbreak. The Czech Republic was spared the worst of the outbreak endured by hotspots such as Italy and Spain, but took similarly drastic steps to stem the virus' spread. It is now emerging from its months-old lockdown, and along with cinemas, pubs, cafes and restaurants are allowed to serve customers again, but only on open-air terraces.

Shopping malls were also open for business, though for some it was odd to be back on the job. “I was really looking forward to the reopening, but it also feels a bit strange to be at work after such a long time,” Ivana Madarova, working in a mall, told AFP. “I spent the free time with my boyfriend and family, we had a good time doing barbecues and being in the garden,” she added, looking out into the empty aisle. And after weeks of closures, steep discounts did little to lure customers at her shop. “We expected a shopping boom but it’s been pretty quiet so far,” she told AFP. Business, however, was brisk in a nearby barber shop.

“We’re absolutely full today until 8:00 pm and bookings keep coming,” receptionist Karolina Mazakova said to the hum of clippers and clicking of scissors. Church services and events with up to 100 people, including sports training sessions, are also allowed again, while elementary and secondary schools opened partially. The Czech Republic registered over 8,000 cases of the virus, including 281 deaths as of Monday. A “collective immunity study” testing the presence of COVID-19 antibodies in people without symptoms released last week showed a low incidence of the disease. Some credit the success to the mandatory face mask rule, which will be eased as of May 25, when they will only be required in shops, offices and on public transport. Restaurants, hotels, zoos and tattoo shops will also open then.—AFP

‘Assassin’s Creed’ stars as Xbox teases new games

Microsoft on Thursday offered the first glimpse at games for its new Xbox console coming this year, playing to fans hungry for escape in a time of pandemic. The latest addition to Ubisoft's blockbuster “Assassin's Creed” franchise called “Valhalla” was the star attraction during a streamed event featuring game studios from around the world. The event highlighted Microsoft's efforts to ramp up its gaming with a new-generation console and popular game titles to help it compete with Sony's leading PlayStation devices.

The new Xbox X console is expected later this year, although Microsoft has not yet announced a release date. Sony is also to release its PlayStation 5 model later this year. PlayStation 4 consoles have trounced Xbox One in sales since the rival gaming systems launched in late 2013. The Microsoft streamed event included a guest appearance by Super Bowl-winning Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes. An animated version of Mahomes also took the field in game-play from a coming EA Madden sports franchise US football title.

Home anime: Ghibli producer offers Totoro lesson online

Time on your hands and a love of anime? A producer from Japan's Studio Ghibli is offering an online tutorial for drawing one of its most beloved characters: Totoro. Toshio Suzuki, former president of the Tokyo-based studio, contributed the video to a website intended to support children stuck at home during the coronavirus outbreak. “Hi everyone, I will teach you how to draw Totoro,” a grinning Suzuki says in the brief lesson, first painting the outline of the rotund character, which resembles something between a cat, an owl and a raccoon.

Using an ink brush, he advises that “the most important” element of illustrating the creature is to draw its rounded eyes set far apart. “This is something you can do at home. Everyone, please draw pictures,” Suzuki says. The lovable Totoro is the star of Studio Ghibli's popular film “My Neighbour Totoro”, which tells the story of two sisters and their friendships with forest creatures. It was released in 1988 and became an instant classic, remaining popular both in Japan and abroad, even hitting Chinese cinemas for the first time in 2018. Suzuki produced the movie, along with other major Studio Ghibli animations such as “Kiki's Delivery Service,” “Princess Mononoke” and “Spirited Away.”

Japan has seen a smaller coronavirus outbreak than parts of Europe or the United States, but many schools have been closed since late February and the country is currently under a state of emergency. Tokyo's popular Ghibli Museum, featuring the works of the studio's



In this frame grab taken from undated handout video footage released by the Nagoya City Education Board Education Centre yesterday, Studio Ghibli producer Toshio Suzuki gives an online tutorial for drawing one of its characters ‘Totoro’ at his home in Tokyo.—AFP

Oscar-winning animator Hayao Miyazaki, is among the public and private facilities that have been closed for months. Suzuki's video is on a website set up by his hometown of Nagoya to support children stuck at home, and also features video messages from celebrities and famed athletes linked to the city.—AFP



This handout photo obtained May 11, 2020 courtesy of Julien's Auctions, shows the guitar played by Kurt Cobain during Nirvana's acclaimed MTV Unplugged in New York performance.—AFP

Cobain ‘Unplugged’ guitar up for auction starting at \$1 million

Decades after grunge's reluctant poster boy took his own life, Kurt Cobain's guitar played during his legendary MTV Unplugged performance is hitting the auction block at a starting estimate of \$1 million. The retro acoustic-electric 1959 Martin D-18E Cobain strummed for Nirvana's career-defining performance in New York — just five months before his shock death at age 27 — will be open to the highest bidder the weekend of June 19th in Beverly Hills and online via Julien's Auctions. Considering the starting estimate of \$1 million for Cobain's guitar, it will likely go for more than double that of a guitar that played a key role in Bob Dylan's artistic evolution from folk to rock, which in 2018 fetched just under half a million.

Nirvana's acoustic performance during the taping for the popular MTV Unplugged series on November 18th, 1993 became what is considered one of history's greatest live albums. It included renditions of Nirvana's hits “About A Girl” and “Come As You Are” along with covers including David Bowie's “The Man Who Sold the World.” The guitar will be on display in the front window of London's Piccadilly Circus Hard Rock Cafe starting May 15 until May 31. Other Cobain memorabilia going up for sale includes a black custom-made and smashed Fender Stratocaster guitar played during 1994's In Utero Tour — starting at \$60,000 — and a metallic silver lame long sleeve button-down shirt the artist wore in the 1993 “Heart-shaped Box” music video, starting at \$10,000. In October 2019 Cobain's iconic cigarette-singed cardigan worn during the “Unplugged” performance sold for \$334,000. And a paper plate Cobain had eaten pizza off of — and then written a Nirvana set list on for a performance at Washington's intimate 9:30 club — that same year went for \$22,400.—AFP

‘Seinfeld’ star Jerry Stiller dies at 92: Actor son Ben

Veteran actor and comedian Jerry Stiller, who found fame on Broadway and later in the smash US show “Seinfeld” has died from natural causes aged 92, his son, the Hollywood star Ben Stiller, said Monday. Stiller Sr and his wife Anne Meara starred on the stage and TV in the 1960s, writing and performing comedy sketches and routines together. He later played George Costanza's short-tempered father Frank on the smash TV show “Seinfeld,” for which he won the Funniest Male Guest Appearance in a TV Series at the American Comedy Awards in 1998.

He was nominated for an Emmy award the year before for the same role. He also played Leah Remini's father in the sitcom “The King of Queens” and starred alongside Ben in the “Zoolander” films. “I’m sad to say that my father, Jerry Stiller, passed away from natural causes,” the award-winning actor and director said in a tweet. “He was a great dad and grandfather, and the most dedicated husband to Anne for about 62 years,” Stiller added. “He will be greatly missed. Love you Dad.” Jason Alexander, who played George in “Seinfeld,” described his screen dad as a “beloved friend.” “He was perhaps the kindest man I ever had the honor to work beside,” Alexander tweeted. “He made me laugh when I was a child and every day I was with him. A great actor, a great man, a lovely friend.”—AFP



This file photo taken on September 27, 2007 shows US actor Jerry Stiller arriving for the premiere of “The Heartbreak Kid” in Los Angeles.



This file photo taken on February 9, 2007 shows US actors Jerry Stiller (left) and his wife Anne Meara (right) posing with their children Amy (second left) and Ben (second right), after being honored with a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Hollywood, California. — AFP photos



In this file photo Microsoft Xbox boss Phil Spencer addresses the audience at the Microsoft Xbox press event ahead of the E3 gaming convention in Los Angeles on June 9, 2019.—AFP

Greenberg said that Microsoft's own game studio is hard at work on hit franchises such as “Halo” only offered on Xbox or Windows-powered personal computers. Xbox Games Studio head Matt Booty said titles from Xbox game studios will be shown off in July. While many titles may be played on different consoles, Sony has a strong library of exclusive content such as Horizon Zero Dawn, God of War and Marvel's Spider-Man, according to analysts who point out that Microsoft has a difficult challenge.

“While, from what we have been told so far, we know the Xbox Series X will, on paper, have stronger specifications than the PS5, Sony has a tight grip on the gaming market,” said market tracker Futuresource. The stars on Thursday were third-party studios including game world giants Ubisoft and Electronic Arts. Assassin's Creed fans got a glimpse of a keenly-anticipated “Valhalla” installment to the franchise, set in a time of Vikings.—AFP



(Left) A picture taken by a nurse on May 8, 2020 at the Hotel Dieu de France Hospital shows colleagues being playful during a break in the coronavirus COVID-19 section of the hospital in the neighborhood of Ashrafieh of the Lebanese capital's eastern suburbs. (Right) A picture taken by a nurse on April 30, 2020 shows a colleague doing a playing card trick during a break. — AFP

In one Beirut hospital, COVID warriors through their own eyes

BEIRUT: In the harshly-lit corridors of the Hotel-Dieu de France Hospital in Beirut, a team of nurses has been snapping pictures with their mobile phones of life behind the scenes of the battle against the coronavirus. The images offer a glimpse of their epic struggle against the pandemic. Exhaustion, prayer, pride and a strong team spirit — the photos chronicle the emotional roller coaster

these nurses have been through in two months.

As they prepare to receive another accolade for their front line role with the May 12 marking of International Nurses Day, their smiles still show behind the masks and goggles. But many of them have gone weeks without seeing their families and, while infections have remained relatively limited in Lebanon, they fear a second wave will flood their wards.

"People don't understand the difficulties we face here," said Sylvia Beudjekian, the head nurse in her unit at Hotel Dieu, one of the main hospitals in the Lebanese capital. "Everybody's tired. We do much more than administer drugs to patients, we look after people who do not have their families by their side to battle sickness," she said.

Drinking coffee, playing guitar or celebrating

Easter — the pictures document some of the little down time they have enjoyed since COVID-19 grounded them at their workplace and permanently clad them in white and blue protective gear. "We've laughed and we've cried and we've learnt a lot," Beudjekian said. "We will continue to do everything we can to be there for everyone but people should be very careful and stay home." — AFP

Burj turned into charity box...

Continued from Page 1

The donation box has raised funds for more than 1.2 million meals so far, organizing body The Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives (MBRGI) said. The fundraising drive is part of a campaign to fund 10 million meals for low-income families during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan by MBRGI, patronized by Dubai's ruler and UAE Vice President Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum.

The number of coronavirus cases in the six Gulf Arab states surpassed 100,000 on Monday, with 557 deaths, according to Reuters calculations based on official figures. Coronavirus infections in the energy producing region had initially been linked to travel. But despite taking early measures to combat the virus, Gulf states have seen a spread among low-income migrant workers living in cramped quarters, prompting authorities to ramp up testing.

Saudi Arabia, the largest Gulf state with a population of about 30 million, has the highest count at 41,014 infections and 255 deaths. It recorded 1,966 new cases and nine new deaths on Monday. The daily number of new cases in the kingdom first crossed the 1,000 threshold on April 18. Health authorities said in April the virus could eventually

infect between 10,000 and 200,000 people in Saudi Arabia.

Elsewhere in the region, the tiny state of Qatar on May 5 overtook regional business hub the United Arab Emirates as having the second highest infection count among the six states. Qatar, where health authorities last Thursday said the outbreak had entered its peak, has recorded a steady increase in cases to 23,623 while the number of deaths has held steady at 14. The UAE total has so far reported 18,198 infections with 198 deaths.

Some Gulf Arab states eased anti-virus containment measures with the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan on April 24. The UAE and Saudi Arabia relaxed curfews that had been in place since mid-March. Saudi Arabia said on Thursday it had formed a police unit to monitor violations of its lockdown rules and banned gatherings of more than five people. Kuwait, where there has been a recent spike in the number of new cases, on Sunday imposed a full curfew for 20 days, exempting only essential services, instead of the 16-hour curfew that had previously been in place.

Dubai emirate, the UAE's tourism and business hub, allowed malls and dine-in restaurants and cafes to reopen with limitations on April 23. Some other emirates have followed suit. Saudi Arabia permitted commercial stores, including malls, to reopen on April 29 with restrictions until May 15. Qatar has maintained the closure of public venues with the exception of those providing essential services and goods. — Reuters

Stranded Indians finally accepted...

Continued from Page 1

pay, such as to telecommunication companies, and many didn't get the chance to enter the processing center during the last five days, as this period was for all nationalities and attendees were in thousands.

Mohammed Khaleel Khan, President of UP NRI Forum Kuwait, was present at the center during the amnesty and during the transfer of this group of Indians to the shelter on Monday. He told Kuwait Times around 80 Indian expats were transferred to the shelter in Abdaly, where visa violators who previously registered for the amnesty are housed, and will leave for India soon.

"The Indian Embassy was present at the amnesty center to help issue travel documents to those who

didn't have their passports. But the problem was that their numbers were huge and the printing machines were not able to print all documents in that short period. Also, some had debts to pay and the amounts were high, so it wasn't easy to manage. And residencies that expired in March were renewed automatically, so such people were not violators anymore," Khan said.

"These 80 people were living on the streets as they didn't have a place to go to, or they came from far-flung areas such as Wafra or Abdaly and couldn't go back with the curfew situation and the absence of transportation," he added.

Khan said the UP NRI Forum is distributing food packages to Indians in need. "We prepare the donated food packages to distribute to those in need, especially since there are many Indian families without any resources as they lost their jobs during this crisis and don't have money to pay the rent or buy food. The Kuwaiti government has taken good care of violators and provided them everything, and we thank the government for their support," concluded Khan.

Zinc-HCQ found effective in some...

Continued from Page 1

patients were reviewed in the analysis, with roughly half given zinc sulfate along with hydroxychloroquine and the antibiotic azithromycin. The other half only received hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin.

Those receiving the triple-drug combination had a 1.5 times greater likelihood of recovering enough to be discharged, and were 44 percent less likely to die, compared to the double-drug combination. It did not, however, change the average time patients spent in hospital (six days), the time they spent on the ventilator (five days), or the total amount of oxygen required.

Senior investigator and infectious disease specialist Joseph Rahimian told AFP it was the first

study to compare the two combinations. But he cautioned that a controlled experiment would be needed to prove the benefits beyond doubt. "The next logical step would be to do a prospective study to see if this holds up in people that you give zinc to, and then you watch and compare," he said.

Hydroxychloroquine has been proposed as a treatment against the SARS-CoV-2 virus because it has antiviral properties that have been proven in lab settings, but not in people. It interferes with the virus' ability to enter the cells - and also seems to block them from replicating once they are already inside. Zinc itself has antiviral properties and past research has suggested it may reduce the time people suffer from common colds.

Rahimian said that it may be that when used to treat coronavirus patients, it is the zinc that does the heavy lifting and is the primary substance attacking the pathogen. Hydroxychloroquine, on the other hand, acts as an agent that transports the zinc into cells, increasing its efficacy, he suggested. — AFP

Indian trains to roll amid surge...

Continued from Page 1

The number of cases is still rising in India, with more than 3,600 new infections recorded on Monday - just below Sunday's record of more than 4,000. Major cities including Delhi, Ahmedabad and Mumbai - home to the Dharavi slum area - have been worst hit by the new surge, and health specialists say infections may only peak in June or July. Maharashtra

state, home to Mumbai, reported more than 1,000 new cases for the sixth straight day, while the southern state of Tamil Nadu, with Chennai as its capital, recorded a record jump.

Experts say India has not been testing enough of its population and has to be ready for a rise in cases. "I am sure the government is making the decisions based on data. There is nothing in the public domain that gives us confidence," said Shahid Jameel, who heads the Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance. "But on the other hand if we don't start opening up, more people will die of hunger than COVID," Jameel told AFP. On Monday Modi held a video conference with state chief ministers to discuss further relaxations of the lockdown when it ends on May 17. — AFP

Kuwait reports 10 deaths, 991 new...

Continued from Page 1

their duties by informing anti-corruption authorities with any information regarding suspicious contracts or spending.

The Cabinet also asked all government departments to take legal action against all those who publish false information that involve tarnishing the reputation of officials without any evidence. Health Minister Sheikh Basel Al-Sabah told the Cabinet that the ministry has filed lawsuits against those who allegedly distorted the image of ministry officials and employees over the coronavirus contracts. Some

activists have alleged that some of the contracts were made at exaggerated costs.

The health minister also explained to the Cabinet the health situation in the country and the steep rise in coronavirus cases, attributing this to failure to abide by health instructions, especially social distancing. But the Cabinet stressed in its statement that the health situation is under control and expected that the number of cases will come down once the total lockdown is strictly applied.

In the meantime, MP Hamdan Al-Azemi demanded in a series of questions that the health minister provide to the Assembly a copy of a report made by a Chinese medical team that visited Kuwait last week. He also asked about the members of the team, their specializations, experience and if they are members of the government or the private sector. Azemi asked about the value of the contract with the team and the places they visited in Kuwait.

Stars

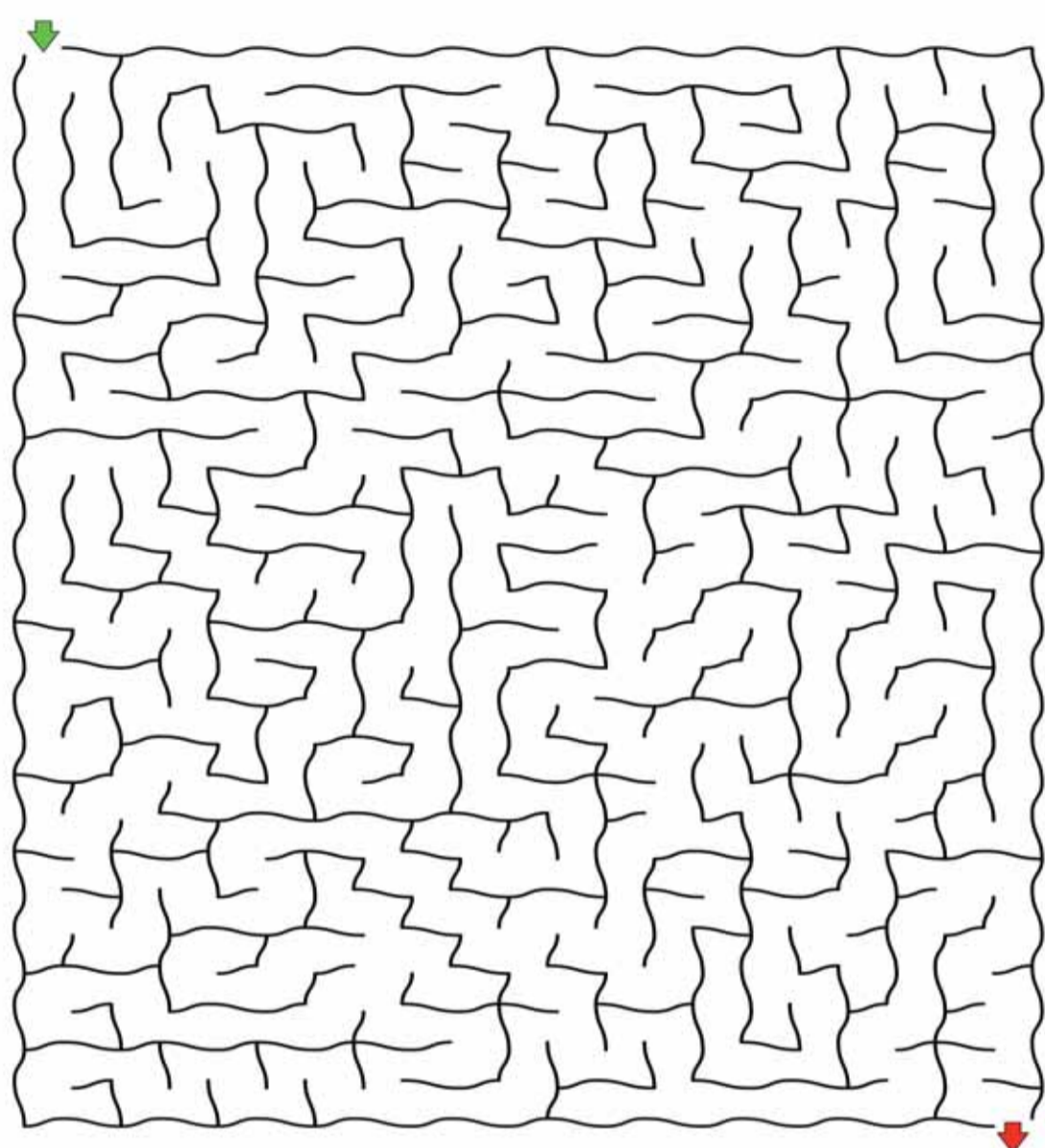
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medium

Find the way



Join the dots



STAR TRACK



Aries (March 21-April 19)

Today's planetary energy should compel you to commit whatever acts of self-affirmation are needed to define your territory and protect your rights. You'll be encouraged to explore your desires and personal tastes, and to express your opinion openly and clearly. Everyone has an identity to claim! Don't be bashful about owning yours now.



Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Today your brain is supercharged, Taurus. If you've been thinking about doing some writing or have put off analyzing an especially tricky problem, this is your moment to get started. You'll find all the inspiration you could ever need. And don't worry about shocking the people in your business or home life with your directness and assertiveness.



Gemini (May 21-June 20)

With today's planetary energy, you'll find yourself a little more extraverted than usual, Gemini. You'll finally be able to say what you really think about things. This is an important change for you, because you'll find that expressing your ideas and beliefs will be a great help in reaching all your goals in life.



Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Today you're unstoppable! You're a very hard worker by nature, and the current planetary alignment will push you to accomplish even more than usual. You have an abundance of energy, more than enough to handle everything that comes your way. You also have an abundance of good judgment, so be sure to use it. Rash decisions, especially those concerning your personal life, could lead to regret later.



Leo (July 23-August 22)

Discard those items from the past for which you no longer have any real use. As much as you like to surround yourself with objects of sentimental value, there comes a moment when it's necessary to look to the future rather than dwell on the past. The time spent cleaning your home and throwing out extraneous things will release you from what has been and allow you to embrace what's to come.



Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Intimacy will be in the air over the next few days. Loved ones want to spend more time with you, and you'll want to invite friends over every night. Social distancing might not make that possible, but there are many other ways to reach out. Some of these wonderful discussions will recharge you and could lead to great things. However, be ready for a bit of tension in case not everyone agrees with your point of view.



Libra (September 23-October 22)

Feeling adventurous, Libra? You're often motivated by your idealistic expectations, and today's planetary configurations will push you even further on your spiritual quest. Satisfy your desire to discover new horizons and meet new people by saying hello to anyone you want, whether electronically or shouting masked from six feet away. Sometimes life's biggest adventures begin with a simple, safe action.



Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

The celestial energy signals a pleasant change for you today, Scorpio. Finally, the overpowering emotions that have been surging from your relationships will subside. You are now beginning a more contemplative phase. You may feel as if you're about to depart on a long trip, with all the time in the world to meditate on the events of the past few months. Sheltering in the calm oasis of home, you can go anywhere.



Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

This is a day to devote time and thought to spiritual pursuits, Sagittarius. Do something inspirational that instills a soul-deep sense of wonder. Light a candle as if you were in church, sit outdoors and watch the changing sky, or study a painting at a museum website. Meditate on your concept of spirituality and the interconnection of humans and the planet. Savor our global connection during this pandemic.



Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

A new phase in your life is beginning, Capricorn. The previous phase could be interpreted as having taught you to be serious and devoted to professional responsibilities. And you certainly accomplished some good deeds to boot. Now you can relax and look ahead to what's next. Let yourself feel the welcome tug of the future.



Aquarius (January 20-February 18)


Today's aspects might clear up some rather sketchy ideas about your professional future, Aquarius. If you long for a change, such as daring to undertake a more artistic pursuit, now is the time to begin planning exactly how to go about it. The first step is to figure out how you can make a living from it. Welcome back to what passes for reality these days!



Pisces (February 19-March 20)

You have acquired some sound confidence in yourself, Pisces. Now it's time to show everyone else by actually putting tis new self-assurance to use in your life. It's as though you have symbolically just completed an in-depth acting class. Well, this is your cue?you're on! Smile as you step onstage, remember your lines, and don't forget to bow when everyone applauds. Because they will. You'll knock'em dead!

Word Search



Hockey Word Search


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DELAY OF GAME

FACE OFF
GOALKEEPER
HAT TRICK
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OFFSIDES
PASS OUT
PENALTY SHOT
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RED LIGHT
RINK
ROUGHING

SAVE
SHIFT
SPEARING
STICKHANDLING
WING
ZAMBONI



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Sports

Photo of the day



ROME: Red Bull Sailing led by double olympic gold medalists Roman Hagara and Hans Peter Steinacher compete in Italy. —Photo taken from www.redbull

Italian golfers swing again as lockdown eases

FASANO: One of Italy's best known golf clubs has reopened after two months of lockdown with a handful of players returning to the links under new social distancing rules. San Domenico Golf in Apulia in the heel of Italy's boot and neighbouring luxury resort Borgo Egnazia reopened at the weekend but face an uncertain future.

"We closed at the beginning of March," said Aldo Melpignano, owner of Borgo Egnazia, where Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel held their wedding in 2012. "But this week the Apulia Region allowed some individual sports to resume and golf is one of them. We jumped at the chance and decided to reopen immediately at the weekend."

The resort and golf club will initially rely on Italian guests but hopes that foreigners will soon also return. "We're resigned to this reality at least for the summer," he said.

Notable changes in the rules on the greens are that players must keep at least three metres apart when hitting the ball and not remove the flag from the hole. European Tour professional Francesco Laporta has returned to training in the open after two months of hitting balls into a net in his garden.

Laporta hopes the season will resume again at the end of July. "There will certainly be new rules to respect," he said, including the lack of spectators. "I think the caddie will be able to keep on following us, working close to us," he said. There are around 260 golf clubs in Italy and the sport remains largely a sport for the rich. —AFP

Fauci says NFL season hopes rest on virus, test response

Virus will make the decision for us: Fauci

NEW YORK: The NFL's chances of playing out its planned 256-game schedule will depend upon containing the coronavirus outbreak and testing results, according to COVID-19 pandemic expert Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Fauci, a leader among the White House Coronavirus Task Force advising the US government on the deadly virus, told NBC Sports that very little is certain about the NFL's hopes to have a season and a Super Bowl in February at Tampa, Florida, as planned.

"The virus will make the decision for us," Fauci said. "It's unpredictable depending upon how we respond in the fall... It will be entirely dependent on the effectiveness with which we as a society respond to the inevitable outbreak that will occur."

Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, held out hope there might be able to be a limited number of spectators at some NFL games but also warned he was against staging a season if the virus was as widespread in September as it is now.

"Right now, if you fast forward, and it's now September, the season starts, I say you can't have a season — it's impossible," Fauci said. "There's too much infection out there."

The NFL's 2020 season is scheduled to start September 10 with Houston at reigning champion Kansas City.

FANS WELCOME?

It could be that games are staged in empty stadiums with only players who test negative for the coronavirus. "I think it's feasible that negative testing players could play to an empty stadium," Fauci said. "Is it guaranteed? No way."

Fauci envisions plenty of tests will be available by September to allow for testing players before games, removing any positive-testing talent from the lineup for two weeks of isolation and using contact tracing to seek out others infected.

"There will be virus out there and you will know your players are negative at the time they step onto the field. You're not endangering," he said. "Also, if the virus is so low that even in the general communi-

who had nothing to do with tennis."

"We don't choose where we are born," she said, adding that she loved her parents and regretted that her endless travelling to tournaments meant she saw them so little. "I cherish the day when I'll be able to afford a gift for my parents," said Ibbou, who has made \$27,825 (25,754 euros) on the WTA Tour and had earned \$3,135 this season before play was halted.

She said that, unlike Thiem, she could not afford a coach or entourage and always had to worry about her budget and, as an Algerian, a visa.

"I'm a lonely lady, travelling the world," she said. "Always looking for the cheapest tickets." She listed all the obstacles she faced as a young player in Algeria: poor facilities, no international coaches, no professional tournaments, no guidance on how to plan a professional career and "not a penny" of state aid.

"Sponsors, you say?" she said. "They don't even exist in Algeria." Last week, the WTA and ATP along with the ITF and the four Grand Slam tournaments said they had set up a "Player Relief Programme" to help the players hardest hit by the coronavirus, adding that they had contributed more than \$6 million.

"Helping players is helping the game to survive," said Ibbou, directly addressing Thiem. "We do not ask anything of you except a bit of respect."

While the letter has not yet drawn a response from Thiem, it has brought a reaction from other players. "You're my hero," Venus Williams reacted under Ibbou's Instagram post. Nick Kyrgios, who had already criticised Thiem, added "Respect" and some emoticons and promised his support when Ibbou thanked him. —AFP

ty the risk is low, then I could see filling a third of the stadium or half the stadium so people could be six feet apart."

But Fauci warned that if four players on a 53-man NFL roster tested positive on the eve of a Sunday game, it might hint that more cases are present among those still testing negative.

"It's likely that if four of them are positive and they've been hanging around together, that the other ones that are negative are really positive," Fauci said.

No player testing positive for the virus could be allowed to play, Fauci said, adding, "It would be malpractice in medicine to put him on the field, absolutely."

That's because the NFL's close contact would be an easy environment in which to spread the virus.

"If people are in such close contact as football players are on every single play, then that's the perfect set up for spreading," Fauci said.

I think it's feasible

Algeria tennis player wins support with emotional video

ALGIERS: Ines Ibbou, a young Algerian tennis player who hit back at Dominic Thiem for saying he did not want to give money to lowly-ranked players, has drawn support from Venus Williams as well her country's government.

"Dear Dominic," Ibbou, who is 620th in the WTA singles rankings, said in an emotional nine-minute video posted on social media, "what would have been my career if I was in your shoes?" In April, Thiem, an Austrian ranked third in the men's game, said he was not happy with a plan supported by Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal for top players to help those lower down the rankings who had lost their tournament income because of the coronavirus shutdown of tennis.

"None of them are going to starve," Thiem told an Austrian newspaper, explaining that "many, many" of those players had not made it to the top because they "don't put the sport above everything else".

"I wouldn't really see why I should give such players money," he went on. "I would rather give money to people or organisations that really need it."

In her response, the 21-year-old Ibbou said life was tough for an African tennis player. "You know that in a country like mine it's not easy for a woman to be a high-level athlete." She said that Thiem grew up in a "magical world" and while both his parents were tennis coaches, "I grew up in a very modest family with parents



WASHINGTON: File photo of director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci listens during the daily briefing on the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, in the Brady Briefing Room at the White House on April 6, 2020, in Washington, DC. —AFP

"As soon as (an infected player) hit the next guy, the chances are that they will be shedding virus all over that person." Fauci has called a coronavirus return later this year "inevitable" and that it could set up a "bad fall and a bad winter," adding, "There's no chance we're going to be virus-free." —AFP

Australia eyes July rugby restart

SYDNEY: A competition between Australia's four Super Rugby teams could be launched in early July as coronavirus restrictions ease, with the axed Western Force and Japan's Sunwolves as possible participants, officials revealed.

Governing body SANZAAR suspended Super Rugby in mid-March as the pandemic closed international borders, but two plans have been drawn up to restart rugby in Australia, said the official rugby.com.au website.

The first option is a five-team championship featuring Australia's four Super Rugby teams, Queensland Reds, NSW Waratahs, ACT Brumbies and Melbourne Rebels, plus Western Force. The second is a six-team version including the Sunwolves.

Rugby Australia's high performance manager Ben Whitaker said the Brumbies and the Waratahs were due to begin limited workouts this week.

All teams should be back to full training by June 8 with the competition planned to begin four weeks after that. "The draw we are looking at is a 12-week competition (with) 10 weeks of regular round matches and depending on the number of teams," he said.

The move comes after New Zealand Rugby on Monday unveiled plans for a domestic competition, Super Rugby Aotearoa, kicking off on June 13.

The Perth-based Western Force were axed from Super Rugby at the end of the 2017 season and now compete in the National Rugby Championship and Global Rapid Rugby, the Asia-Pacific competition founded by Australian mining magnate Andrew Forrest.

The Sunwolves are in their final season of Super Rugby after southern hemisphere governing body SANZAAR decided to drop them due to skyrocketing costs and poor on-field performances.

Including the Force in a domestic competition would be relatively straightforward, but Whitaker conceded that virus-induced border shutdowns made the Sunwolves a more difficult proposition. "The Sunwolves' situation is a bit more complicated than the others with their team, not just coming from Japan but a variety of countries having to assemble in Australia to take part," he said.

"We're working closely with government on the opportunity for them to do that."

Whitaker suggested the Japanese team could be based in Queensland or New South Wales for the duration of the competition.

Authorities in Canberra have already set a precedent for allowing overseas sporting teams into the country, with the National Rugby League's New Zealand Warriors basing themselves in Tamworth before a competition restart scheduled for May 28.

Whitaker also hoped that Australia's home Tests in July against Ireland and Fiji could be rescheduled to later in the year, along with Rugby Championship fixtures against New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina. —AFP

Sports

How 'Thrilla in Manila' changed Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier forever

'It's gonna be a thrilla, and a chilla, and a killa, when I get the gorilla in Manila'

MANILA: When Muhammad Ali survived 14 brutal rounds with Joe Frazier in the 'Thrilla in Manila' 45 years ago, it wrote a page in boxing folklore but left both men forever diminished.

Fought in the Philippines' stifling daytime heat, with barely functioning air conditioning, Frazier was beaten nearly blind and Ali was on the verge of surrender. In the end, it was Frazier's trainer who threw in the towel to hand Ali victory on October 1, 1975, settling their head-to-head 2-1. But the fight came at a cost to both men.

"Ali and Frazier would never be the same again, after pouring and spending practically all their power and durability in Manila," said Recah Trinidad, a Philippine boxing columnist.

Ali, who had beaten George Foreman in the 'Rumble in the Jungle' in Zaire a year earlier, came into the fight at 33, his best years well behind him.

They battled inside the 25,000-seat Araneta Coliseum with such ferocity that spectators including Imelda Marcos, wife of then-Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, were spattered with blood.

"It was like death. Closest thing to dyin' that I know of," Ali later said of the bout. Ali set an acrimonious tone in the weeks leading to the fight, enraging Frazier, 31, by likening him to a giant ape.

"It's gonna be a thrilla, and a chilla, and a killa, when I get the gorilla in Manila," Ali boasted, coining the nickname that still resonates today.

On fight day the momentum swung back and

forth between the men, who were in their third and final match-up. One Frazier punch sent Ali's mouthpiece flying into the fifth row, but neither fighter fell.

The fight in the tropics was staged in the daytime to suit US television audiences, but the crowd and TV lights overwhelmed the air-conditioning. "At 125 degrees — we were fighting each other (as well as) against the heat," Frazier said in the 2008 documentary "Thrilla in Manila".

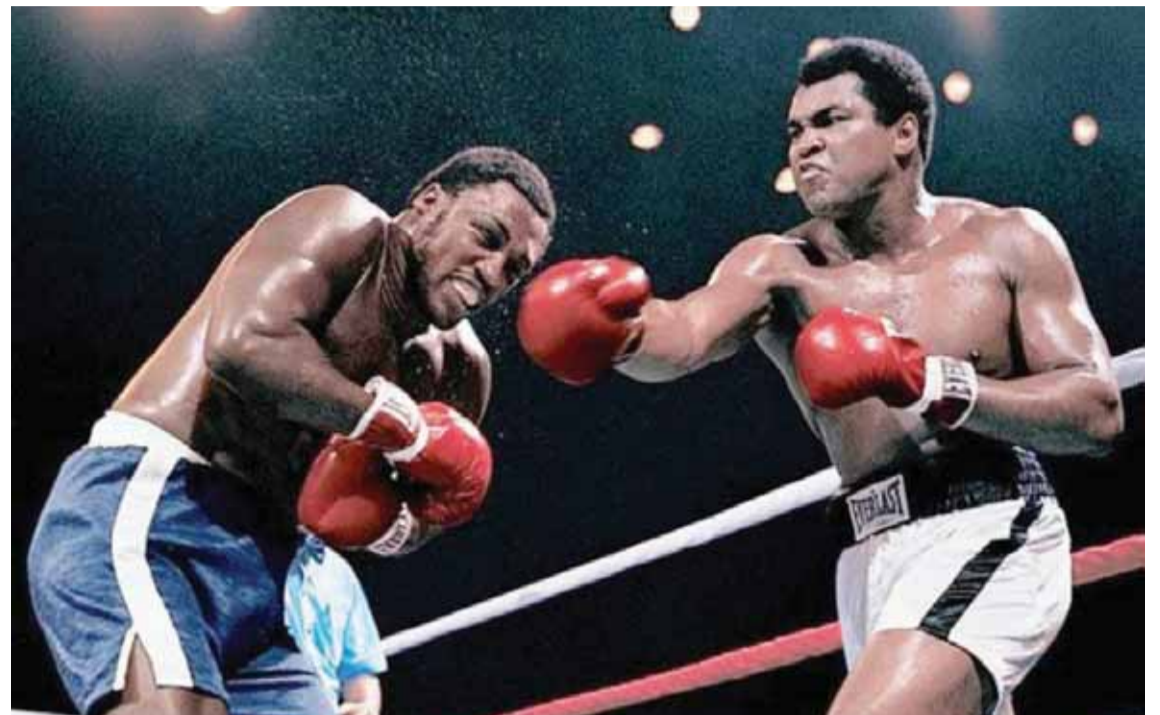
Ali's blows had swollen Frazier's right eye nearly shut, and he was nearly blind in his left due to a training injury. His face soaked in blood, Frazier argued with his trainer Eddie Futch to let him come out for the 15th round, but Futch stopped the fight.

Later, it was revealed that Ali himself wanted to quit. His biographer Thomas Hauser told the 2008 documentary that at the end of the round an

Ali cornerman heard the champion telling trainer Angelo Dundee to "cut 'em (gloves) off".

"Round 14 was the closest I've seen somebody come to killing somebody," Ali's fight doctor Ferdie Pacheco told the documentary makers. But after the Thrilla, "both men were never the same again", said Nick Giogoco, a sports analyst at the Manila Bulletin.

He said that although Ali would defend his world title a further six times, and regain it in a rematch after losing to Leon Spinks in 1978, the self-styled "Greatest of All Time" never fully recovered from the "brutal beatdown" Frazier had inflicted.



Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier in the 'Thrilla in Manila' 45 years ago.

Ali would finally hang up his gloves in 1981 aged 39, following consecutive losses to Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick. He retired with a win-loss record of 56-5. The "Louisville Lip" died nearly four years ago after a long battle with Parkinson's disease.

"Smokin' Joe" (32-4-1) fought only twice more after the Manila epic, being stopped by Foreman for a second time in 1976 before coming out of retirement five years later to draw with the unheralded Floyd Cummings over 10 rounds. Frazier died in 2011. — AFP

Pietersen concerned about England pace duo

MUMBAI: Kevin Pietersen is concerned about England's Test bowling resources when the long-serving pace duo of James Anderson and Stuart Broad call time on their careers, the former captain has told Reuters.

The experienced new ball pair, both in their 30s, have recently said they were aiming to be part of England's bid to reclaim the Ashes in Australia next year and would subsequently consider retirement.

"I am worried about England's test team, when Broad and Anderson go. They are on their last legs at the moment," Pietersen told Reuters in an interview. "If Broad and Anderson go, there's going to be a big, big gap to fill. Do they have the bowlers?"

"Mark Wood is very good, however he's full of injuries. And Jofra Archer, he's also had that elbow injury during that South African series, so he hardly played. "So

it will be about how quickly England can fill that gap because ... if you can't take 20 wickets in the test match you really are behind the eight ball."

Anderson, 37, is test cricket's most prolific fast bowler with 584 victims but has not played since January when he suffered a rib injury in South Africa. Broad, who is second on England's list with 485 wickets, is four years younger but does not see his playing career continuing as long as Anderson's.

Pietersen was more confident about the leadership of the team, though admitted he was among those who had reservations about Joe Root's captaincy before the 3-1 test series triumph in South Africa earlier this year.

"I think that he came away from that tour a much better leader, a much better captain, and with a lot more respect from a lot of people that had reservations about him leading into that test tour in South Africa," he said.

England held Australia to a 2-2 draw in last year's home Ashes series but even then needed Ben Stokes's brilliant unbeaten 135 to win the third test in thrilling fashion at Headingley.

The New Zealand-born all-rounder also played a spectacular leading role in England's 50-overs World Cup triumph in 2019 and was Player of the Series in South Africa.

"He's been absolutely sensational over the last few years," said Pietersen. "We all knew he had cricketing talent, we all knew he had the ability to turn the game on its head."

"But for him to consistently do it, and for him to prepare the way that he continues to prepare, and to play the way that he plays, he is a huge asset to that England team."

Despite his appreciation for Stokes's abilities, Pietersen said it was too soon to compare the 28-year-old with England great Ian Botham. "Comparing people, I think you can only do at the end of a career," said Pietersen, who scored more than 8,000 runs for England in 104 tests.

"In terms of match winning they're right up there with each other. They both win games, single-handedly, so the comparisons I think are quite unfair while a guy is still playing."

"I hated being compared to people. I just wanted to play and be me." South African-born Pietersen has continued to be himself after retiring from cricket in 2018, becoming deeply involved in animal conservation and highlighting the plight of the rhinoceros. His charity, Save our Rhino Africa/India (SORAI), will be relaunched towards the end of June. — Reuters

IPL cancellation could cost Indian cricket half a billion dollars

NEW DELHI: Scrapping the money-spinning Indian Premier League this year because of the coronavirus pandemic would cost more than half a billion dollars, but cutting players' pay was not yet being considered, a top official has told AFP.

The world's richest Twenty20 tournament is staring at a first wipeout in its 12-year history after the original March 29 start date was postponed repeatedly. Cancellation of the IPL for 2020 would mean a huge financial hit. "The BCCI is looking at a big revenue loss. In case the IPL does not take place, the loss would be close to 40 billion rupees (\$530 million), or even more," said Board of Control for Cricket in India treasurer Arun Dhumal. India, like other cricket nations, is anxious to see a return to competitive international sport, but has to follow government orders and advice. "We are not sure whether we will be able to have it this year," he admitted. A one-day international series against South Africa in March has already been cancelled but it is the IPL, which began in 2008, that generates the bulk of BCCI revenue and is thought to be worth more than \$11 billion a year to the Indian economy.

"We will only be able to figure out the exact revenue loss once we are sure of how many games we have lost," said Dhumal. The IPL brand value was estimated at \$6.7 billion last year by the Duff and Phelps financial consultancy. Indian broadcaster Star Sports paid more than \$220 million for five years of TV rights up to 2022. But it was reportedly targeting \$400 million of revenue in 2020 alone.

Gripped by an international lockdown, many national boards have been forced into cost-cutting. Cricket Australia has laid off most of its staff while the England and



IPL cricket stars in action.

Wales Cricket Board has announced pay cuts.

Other top sports, such as football's English Premier League and Spain's La Liga, have also seen players accept wage cuts. But Dhumal, who joined the BCCI leadership last year alongside president Sourav Ganguly and secretary Jay Shah, said that it was hoped to avoid pay cuts for players.

"That would be the last thing that we would want to do at our end," said Dhumal. "That is why we are working (on) how much is the loss finally we have to pay. "So once we are able to assess that then we might consider it, but it will be the last thing on our agenda."

Dhumal said India's tour of Sri Lanka, scheduled to begin in June, would only go ahead if the pandemic eases. "The safety and health of our cricketers is paramount and any shred of doubt, we will not shy away from

"I think we should scrap the season. Everybody go home, get healthy, come back next year. Just scrap the season. Just scrap it," O'Neal told the newspaper.

"To try and come back now and do a rush playoffs as a player? Any team that wins this year, there's an asterisk. They're not going to get the respect."

"What if a team that's not really in the mix of things all of a sudden wins with a new playoff format? Nobody is going to respect that. So, scrap it. Worry about the safety of the fans and the people. Come back next year." Dominating center O'Neal combined with the late Kobe Bryant and sparked the Los Angeles Lakers to NBA crowns from 2000 through 2002, being named the NBA Finals Most Valuable Player each time, then powered the Miami Heat to the 2006 title.

O'Neal, 48, retired in 2011 after a 19-season NBA

career and has been working as a television analyst.

Current Lakers star LeBron James, who had LA atop the Western Conference when the season went on hiatus, has said no one should be talking about canceling the season. The league has been working on plans to gather teams in a single city, test and house players in a secured area and stage games without fans in a controlled area, with Las Vegas and Orlando most often mentioned as possible sites for the "bubble" plan.

"I understand how players are feeling. I really do," O'Neal told the newspaper. "But any team that gets it done this year, there's going to be an asterisk on that championship." O'Neal doesn't want to see any resumption unless all involved — players, coaches, referees and the broadcast personnel — are safe from the deadly virus. — AFP

Serie A set for team training on May 18

MILAN: Serie A clubs can return to team training from May 18 if they make adjustments to medical protocols, the Italian government announced on Monday. The Italian Football Federation (FIGC) met with the government's technical scientific committee (CTS) last week to discuss details for a return to group training as the country emerges from a two-month coronavirus lockdown.

Italy's sports minister Vincenzo Spadafora and health minister Roberto Speranza said in a joint statement on Monday that the CTS had largely accepted the FIGC protocol for a resumption of group sessions.

"The opinion requested by the government from the Technical Scientific Committee confirms the line of prudence," the ministers' statement said. "The indications of the CTS, which are to be considered stringent and binding, will be sent to the Federation for the necessary adjustments of the protocol in order to allow for the safe resumption of team training starting from May 18."

Football has been suspended in Italy since March 9 amid the pandemic which has killed nearly 31,000 people in the country. The Italian government has allowed squads to return to individual training sessions in team facilities from May 4.

But there remain issues to be decided such as the quarantine of players in case of positive tests for coronavirus. Italian football bosses want to follow the example of Germany, which returns to action on May 16, and where only positive cases would be put into isolation.

But the CTS insists football must comply with the general rule of two weeks in isolation for those who have been in contact with positive cases. There are still 13 rounds of football to be played for some teams between mid-June, when the FIGC hopes to return to action, and August.

Since the return to training last week, Fiorentina and Sampdoria announced 10 positive tests. In addition, a Torino player tested positive. Spadafora later stressed the many tests that will need to be carried out on Serie A footballers would not be done "to the detriment of citizens".

"If these changes are made, there may be collective training from May 18," the sports minister told Italian television. "Whether the championship can resume, we will have to wait at least another week to see how the curve of contagion evolves and then be able to decide."

One by one players have returned to Italy, with Juventus forward Cristiano Ronaldo observing a two-week quarantine period and Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic returning to AC Milan on Monday evening.

Italy on Monday reported fewer than 1,000 people in intensive care for COVID-19 for the first time since March 10 when the country went into confinement. — AFP

Shaq says scrap NBA season

LOS ANGELES: Retired four-time NBA champion Shaquille O'Neal says the league would be smart to call off the halted 2019-20 campaign and avoid crowning a champion that would carry an "asterisk."

O'Neal, in an interview with USA Today, said players should start to prepare for a 2020-21 season and set aside a campaign halted in March by the coronavirus pandemic with five weeks of regular-season games and two months of playoffs remaining.

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EPL gets green light for June re-start



LIVERPOOL: File photo taken on January 02, 2017 show fans shield their eyes from the Sun during the English Premier League football match between Everton and Southampton at Goodison Park in Liverpool. The Premier League is adamant that it can overcome huge logistical challenges to get players back on the pitch during the coronavirus crisis but has long since accepted there will be no fans in the stadiums. — AFP

LONDON: Premier League clubs received a boost to their hopes of completing the season on Monday as the government published a "roadmap" that could see the return of elite sport in England from June 1.

As the 20 English top-flight clubs met for further talks on "Project Restart", ministers announced plans to ease the coronavirus lockdown. Under step two of that process, which cannot begin any earlier than June 1, sporting events would be allowed "to take place behind closed doors for broadcast, while avoiding the risk of large-scale social contact".

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he believed the return of sport on TV would "provide a much-needed boost to national morale."

Supporters face a long wait to be allowed to attend matches, though, with the latest guidelines recognising a return to sport in front of a crowd "may only be fully possible significantly later depending on the reduction in numbers of infections".

Premier League clubs had been planning for a return to action no earlier than the week beginning June 8. Before the resumption of matches can be considered, protocols need to be agreed on how to return to group training safely and on how the Premier

League would deal with positive tests.

Brighton confirmed on Sunday that a third member of their squad had tested positive. Cases have also been found in squads in Germany, where the Bundesliga is due to restart this weekend, as well as Italy, Spain and Portugal in recent days.

"We have protocols created and reviewed, we have a testing company appointed, but the important consultation with players and managers is the next step," said Premier League CEO Richard Masters.

"No decisions will be made until after we have talked to players and managers and those meetings are scheduled for later this week."

Players have voiced their concerns at the prospect of being rushed back into training and, eventually, into playing a contact sport at a time when the rest of the public remain encouraged to abide by social-distancing guidelines.

The UK has been one of the worst-hit countries in

the global pandemic, with the government officially recording nearly 32,000 deaths of people who had tested positive for COVID-19.

"We are just people too," tweeted Norwich midfielder Todd Cantwell on Sunday. There is also disagreement over where the remaining 92 matches of the season would be played.

League chiefs believed they would only get the government's green light to restart if matches were held at a limited number of neutral venues to reduce the medical, police, security and broadcast personnel required.

A number of clubs near the bottom of the table have spoken openly of their opposition to the plan as they believe it would increase the risk of being relegated.

"With all these compromises and health risks we are asked to finish a competition that bears no resemblance to the one we started," Watford's chairman and chief executive Scott Duxbury told the club's website. Those higher up the table are also concerned at the

prospect of having to reimburse sponsors who have paid for naming rights on their stadiums.

"I think everybody would prefer to play home and away if at all possible. And I think it's clear to see that some clubs feel more strongly about that than others," added Masters. "We are in contact with the authorities and listening to that advice while also representing club views in those discussions."

The prospect of appeasing the clubs struggling at the bottom by ruling out relegation this season also appears over after the English Football Association rejected that idea and told the Premier League that final standings must be based on "sporting merit" if no more games can be played.

Masters admitted the Premier League had for the first time held discussions on how the league would be decided if matches cannot restart, but said no definitive formula had been approved.

"It was the first time we discussed curtailment - it's still our aim to finish the season obviously but it's important to discuss all the options with our clubs," he said. "No conclusions were reached on any other models. Those are future conversations we may need to have." — AFP

MLB owners approve 2020 season proposal for players: Reports

NEW YORK: Major League Baseball team owners have approved a proposal for starting the coronavirus-delayed 2020 season in early July in ballparks without spectators, according to multiple reports Monday.

The campaign was shut down two months ago while pre-season games were underway and the proposal for an 82-game season, about half the normal length, must still be approved by the players union.

Negotiations were expected to begin today, according to ESPN, USA Today, The Athletic and NBC Sports. The MLB plan becomes the first formal proposal for a major US sports league to exit a coronavirus hiatus, with the NBA, Major League Soccer and the National Hockey League seasons having

been halted by the deadly outbreak.

The proposal would have players report to training camps starting in mid-June for about three weeks, either at home ballparks or training sites in Florida and Arizona, where stay-at-home rules have been eased.

The season would launch between July 1-4 and playoffs would expand from 10 to 14 teams, with two extra wild-card clubs in both the National and American Leagues. The playoffs would end in early November, only slightly later than normal.

Teams would mostly play against clubs from their own division, minimizing travel and expenses. They would also face clubs from the same division in the opposite league. Designated hitters would come to bat instead of pitchers for National League teams for the first time in history. AL clubs have had the rule in place for decades.

Teams would play at their own home ballparks where allowed by state and local governments. Teams whose home stadiums are unavailable would play out of their spring training facilities.

Due to border crossing issues with Canada, the Toronto Blue Jays might have to play out of their Florida training headquarters. Playing without tick-

etbuyers would be expected to trim 40% off MLB revenues and the owners reportedly would seek a 50-50 revenue-sharing deal similar to what the NFL and NBA have used.

That might cause an issue with players, who are looking at losing half a season of their regular salary already in a shrunken campaign and could worry about owners pushing for a salary cap in the next collective bargaining agreement when the current one expires in December 2021.

MLB team owners have never offered to share extra profits with players so the union might very well object to having to share losses with the team owners this time.

Teams would expand rosters from 26 to 30 players with a support squad of 20 players available as replacements in case of injury or illness, including presumably positive coronavirus tests.

Health issues would also have to be solved to the players' satisfaction, as tweets from Washington Nationals pitcher Sean Doolittle noted health issues that got little mention in early details on the MLB proposal. "Bear with me, but it feels like we've zoomed past the most important aspect of any MLB restart plan: health protections for players, families,

staff, stadium workers and the workforce it would require to resume a season," Doolittle tweeted.

Doolittle, who helped the Nationals beat Houston in last year's World Series, wondered how many COVID-19 tests would be needed for the league during the pandemic.

"Baseball requires a massive workforce besides the players: coaches, clubhouse staff, security, grounds crews, umpires, gameday stadium staff, TV & media... we need to protect everyone," he tweeted.

"And that's before we get to hotel workers and transportation workers... They are essential workers. We wouldn't be able to play a season without them, and they deserve the same protections."

He also asked how much risk players are willing to assume to even play a season knowing that anyone involved with a game could be among the 20% of cases with severe symptoms — and if added health-care benefits would be available for people with long-term health issues after catching the virus. "We don't have a vaccine yet, and we don't really have any effective anti-viral treatments," Doolittle asked. "What happens if there is a second wave?" — AFP