


Friday Times

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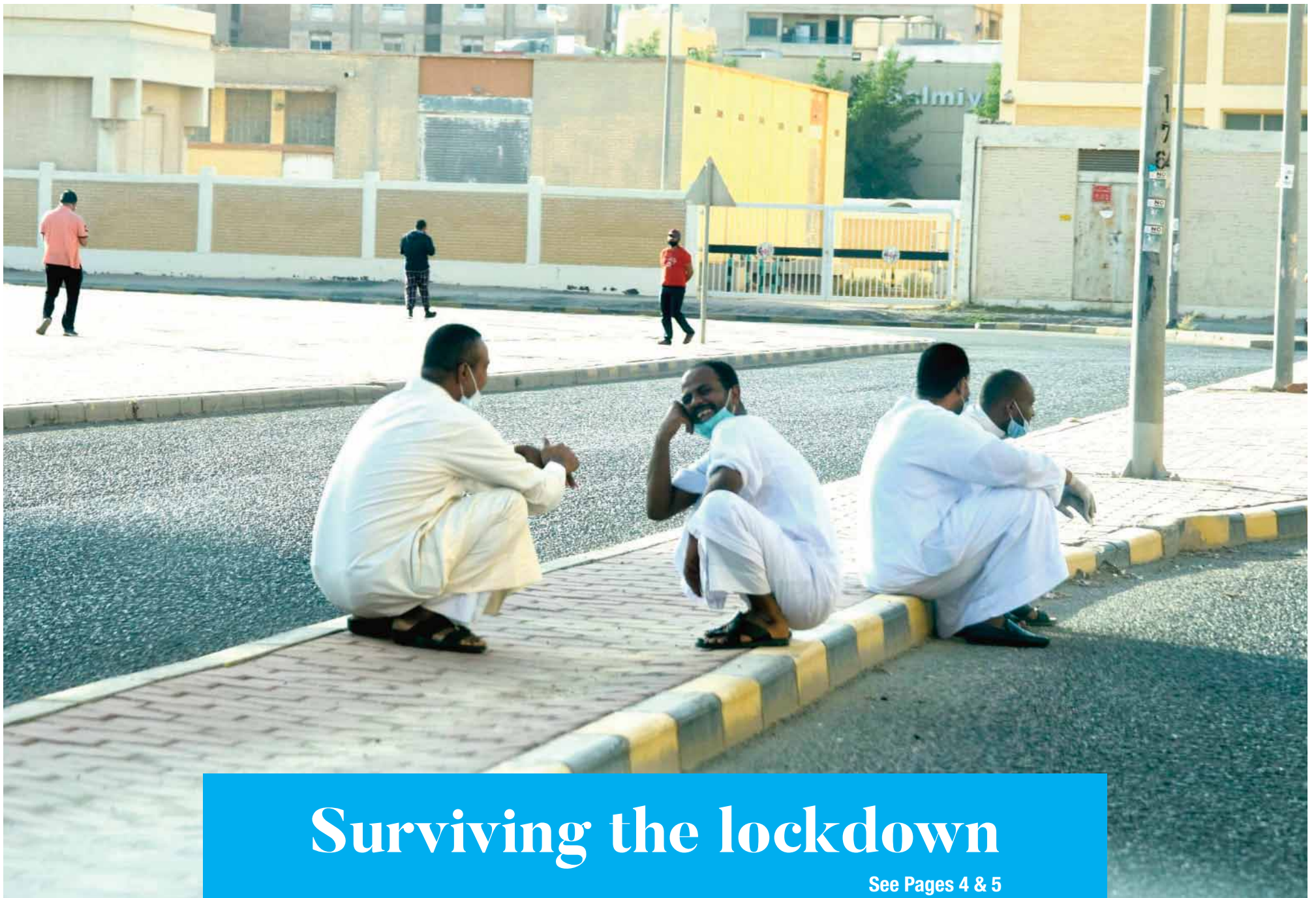
Ramadan KAREEM

Fajr	03:27
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Surviving the lockdown

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Local

What day is it?



Pandemic Diaries

By Jamie Etheridge

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Today marks Day 5 of the full curfew in Kuwait. This week also marks 12 weeks (or 3 months) since children stopped going to school and nine weeks since the airport, mosques and other public places were closed. Eight weeks ago the government imposed a partial curfew, a decision at the time that seemed remarkable and frightening. This weekend also marks six weeks since Mahboula and Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh were isolated, their inhabitants cut off from the rest of Kuwait.

Each progressive measure adds to the surreality of the experience. What day is it? How many days since this all started? Where do we begin counting from? Time, our routine way of segmenting the day into minutes and hours, has lost its meaning. What does it matter if its Sunday or Thursday when there are no appointments, meetings or places to go?



The major event will be on May 30 (insha'Allah)

Life has become calendar-less. Working or being at home, the days begin to fold one into the other. By now, most of us have established some sort of routine. We might be working from home all day, sleeping at night. Or maybe sleeping until noon, watching TV or reading, exercising, waiting for iftar. Ramadan typically is spent visiting family and friends, attending gatherings, enjoying qhabqa feasts and spending the nights outside. Now, however, that is impossible, and so we wait out the long, quiet nights alone or in our small, family groups.

And the next day, we do it all over again and in this way time passes but within very narrow sets of experiences so that the days seem to mimic each other, to repeat themselves until we lose track of time, track of the days that have passed. Is it 12 or 13 weeks since schools closed? Are we on Day 5 or Day 6 of the lockdown? Is the day Friday or Saturday?

Most lose count, waiting only for the two upcoming events that will change the situation – May 23 or thereabouts for the end of Ramadan and the start of Eid. This will disrupt the routine in many households in Kuwait. The major event will be on May 30 (insha'Allah), when the planned and hoped for freedom will come with the end of the lockdown.

In the meantime, we stay at home and wait our way through the minutes, hours and days.

Ramadan 2020



Local Spotlight

By Muna Al-Fuzai

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The holy month of Ramadan will soon be over. It is a month of great sanctity and importance for fasting Muslims. But despite the fact that Muslims have performed the duty of fasting, the fear of an outbreak of the coronavirus and government measures taken in this regard in all Muslim countries, including Kuwait, have deprived them from practicing many social Ramadan rituals and traditions that they have been accustomed to since childhood.

I think the atmosphere of the holy month this year is sad, especially since many social customs have stopped completely. There are no visits between families and friends, no prayers in mosques, Ramadan evenings or cafes open until dawn. Everything is shut down. I think much of the joy of Ramadan was characterized by large family meetings and gatherings, especially since family gatherings are an important matter for Arab families, which has disappeared this year.

It's normal to say that everyone misses the atmosphere and spirituality of Ramadan, but there is hope is that the crisis will be over soon. The population of Kuwait as in the rest of the Arab countries is confronting exceptional circumstances, most notably a complete curfew, but the pub-

lic were granted two hours in the evening for walking in their area of residence. I believe that despite commitment by some people to follow the measures of social distancing and putting on masks outdoors, however the high figures recorded daily confirm that commitment to health rules is not working for everyone.

There are those who believe that getting infected with the virus means going to the hospital and being treated. This is something I think is not true. There are light symptoms that do not require going to the hospital. Also, the health system cannot fully absorb all cases, including those that may just be of seasonal flu, but unfortunately I think there is a lot of ignorance and misconceptions among some people.

The problem also is that there are those who believe everything they read on social media.

I personally only trust and believe the statements of the ministry of health. I have stopped listening to the statements of the World Health Organization these days, especially with the entry of international global political conflicts. The last thing I need to hear is a political view on a medical issue.

Technology has formed an ideal way to solve the problem of social divergence, as it has become a bridge to communicate with friends and family, as well as activating "online services" to purchase needs, after these features were neglected for a long time. I think it is natural that most people miss the atmosphere they were used to in Ramadan. But, despite the harsh lifestyle imposed by the pandemic in Kuwait, the crisis is global and requires a person to remain at home and stay safe.

Follow instructions for your safety



IN MY VIEW

By Abdellatif Sharaa

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A sad story from Egypt started with a well-built healthy young man, who was dismissing claims about the dangers of the coronavirus. He was saying the disease is as simple as the common cold, and that we should not have this fear, which is not necessary. He also bragged about how healthy his people are and can resist such a disease.

A few days ago, the same young man was shown on television, infected with the virus, and actually the video showed this man during his last hours, suffering severely from the symptoms before passing away. I hope and pray to Allah that people do not become complacent as time goes by, and risk being infected with the coronavirus because just one mistake may cause problems to many people who will suffer a lot and go through the torturous journey to recovery, I hope.

I am also shocked at the death of doctors - some of whom I met on occasions - because of COVID-19, and some are under treatment right now. May Allah grant them speedy recovery. So this is clear evidence that the virus does not discriminate at all - it does not see color, religion, profession, rich, poor or anything. It just hits and does not run at

all - in fact it fights as fiercely as we do against it, and has claimed and is claiming lives in large numbers.

Let us keep complying with the authorities' instructions and rules of common sense. If we look at statistics published by the health ministry, we realize how critical it is to be careful and considerate towards ourselves and others.

On May 4, there were 295 new cases and two deaths; the following day saw 526 cases with 11 in critical condition. May 6 saw 485 cases and two deaths. The numbers hovered around the same rate until May 10, when 1065 new cases were recorded, 19 of whom were in critical condition and nine deaths. Then on May 13, 751 cases were recorded including 11 critical cases, while there were seven deaths. The picture is very clear and self explanatory. Heed the warnings - stay home please!

Although the country is under a total curfew, authorities allowed people to go out for a walk around their homes every day for two hours in the afternoon. This is a good decision that will safeguard the physical and mental health of individuals, but what is not good are the scenes in some areas as I saw myself and on social media - people in large numbers walking close to each other, crossing in front of each other and standing and talking! Isn't this defeating the purpose?! I am afraid this could be due to ignorance or negligence, though there is no excuse as the crisis has been ongoing for six months!

Finally, it was a good sight when policemen were distributing masks to people during the two-hour walk period, and I hope that the masks are used, and used correctly!

Final word: "Our spirit is to be considerate and have compassion for people. It is a social responsibility." — Alan Wong



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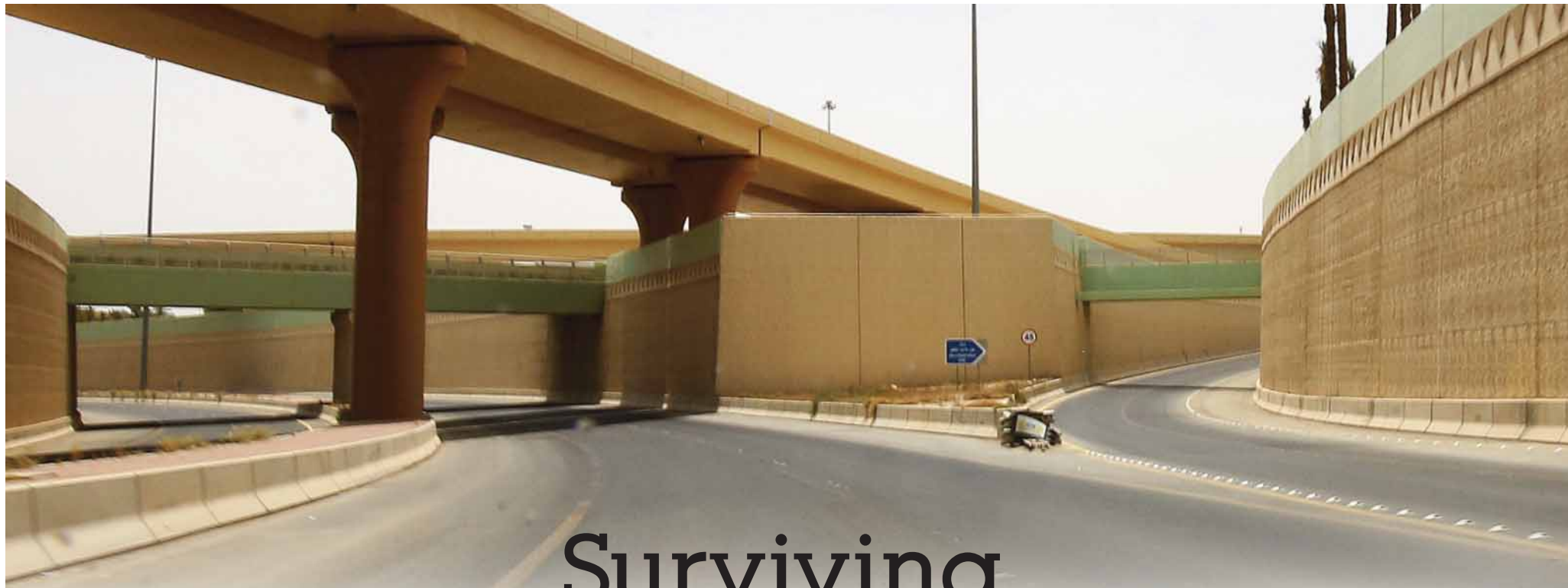
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Local



Surviving THE LOCKDOWN

Shops are closed and roads are deserted during the 20-day nationwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm, the streets come alive, with entire families out for a walk.

– Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Fouad Al-Shaikh





Signs from God

By Dr Teresa Leshner

I was driving home yesterday when I spotted this sign on the road: "Camera ahead - 80." I thought, how nice of the traffic department to warn us that a camera is ahead and remind us that the speed limit is 80 km/hr. I drove ahead and looked for the camera. Sure enough, about 100 meters from the sign was the camera, barely visible behind a tree branch. I realized that many such signs are placed along the road – they warn us of danger, give us directions or information, prohibit certain actions, and even relate good news such as "sale!" or "opening soon." To all those who invest in signs to help us on our way – thank you.

Not only on the roads are there signs. God said He placed them throughout the universe and within our own selves. But what do they say and where do they lead? For those who think, ponder, and reflect, the signs tell him a lot about the Creator of our world and relate certain facts of our existence. But not everyone is paying attention to the natural phenomena around us and analyzing their meanings.

So our Creator did us a great favor by spelling out His signs in a more obvious way. One by one, over 6,000 signs are catalogued in human language in what is known as the Quran. The "signs" share information, give directions, demarcate boundaries, prohibit dangerous actions, relate good news and give very clear warnings. Here is a sample of God's signs from the Quran:

Information: God (Himself) bears witness that there is no

god but Him, as do the angels and those with knowledge – He is the One upholding justice. There is no god but Him, the Almighty, Most Wise. (3:18)

Directions: ...And establish regular prayer for My remembrance. [20:14]

Prohibitions: ...Indeed, intoxicants and gambling... are but defilement from the works of Satan, so shun them so that you may be successful. (5:90)

Good News: Verily, the dwellers of Paradise that Day, will be busy in joyful things. They and their spouses will be in pleasant shade, reclining on thrones. They will have therein fruits (of all kinds), and all that they will ask for. 'Peace' shall be the word from a Merciful Lord. [36:55-58]

Investment Opportunities! Who is he that will lend to God a goodly loan so that He may multiply it for him many times over? (2:245). Indeed, the charitable men and the charitable women who have loaned God a goodly loan shall have it multiplied for them by their Lord. So for them, there is a gracious reward awaiting in the Hereafter. (57: 18)

Advice: Do not turn your cheek to people in contempt, and do not walk upon the earth proudly exultant. Indeed, God loves no one who is smug, boastful. (31:18)

Warnings: Indeed, God will not forgive associating any god with Him. But He forgives anything less than this for whomever He so wills. Thus, whoever associates gods with God has truly strayed far astray! (4:116) Truly Hell is waiting- a destination for the transgressors. (78: 21-22).

Corrections: Righteousness in the sight of God is not the

mere turning of your faces toward the East or the West. Rather, true righteousness dwells in one who believes in God and the Last Day, and in the angels, and the Book, and in the prophets; it dwells in one who, despite his love for it, gives of his wealth in charity to close relatives and orphans, and to the indigent and the wayfarer, and to beggars and for the emancipation of slaves; it dwells in one who establishes the Prayer and gives charity, and those who fulfill their covenant when they make a covenant, as well as in those who are patient during periods of affliction and harm and times of conflict. These are the ones who have been truehearted, and it is such as these who are the God-fearing. (2:177)

The signs are presented in various ways and repeated often to make sure the reader understands them and the correlations between them. Some of the signs mention the signs themselves: "(Here) indeed are signs for a people that are wise." (2:164). "Thus does God make clear His signs to you, in order that you may be guided." (3:103). "We will show them Our Signs in the universe, and in their own selves, until it becomes manifest to them that this [Qur'an] is the Truth" (41:53).

To our Creator, who gave us these signs to help us on our way – thank you!

NOTE: 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.



The muezzin of the Grand Mosque of Basra, closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, reads the Holy Quran during the holy month of Ramadan in this southern Iraqi city on Wednesday. – AFP

Kuwait Times

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Local

Kuwaitis continue crossing border from Saudi Arabia



KUWAIT: Kuwaitis cross the borders from Saudi Arabia into Kuwait. —KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti citizens continued crossing the Nuwaiseeb border from Saudi Arabia for the second day on Wednesday, part of a government repatriation plan to bring back nationals amidst the spread of coronavirus. Citizens passed through the crossing smoothly and in line with instructions of the health

authorities, the ministry of interior said in a statement. It said citizens can enter the country through Nuwaiseeb crossing from 10:00 am until 3:00 pm, and they would be taken to mandatory quarantine at Khairan Resort. The land repatriation plan began on Tuesday and is set to end on May 20. — KUNA



KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem takes part in the speakers of world parliaments' preparatory meeting. — KUNA

Ghanem takes part in preparatory speakers' meeting

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem participated Wednesday in an online meeting of the fourth preparatory committee for the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament to be held in August in Vienna. Ghanem's participation in the meeting comes as a representative of the Arab countries in the Inter-Parliamentary Union, where he previously participated in the past two meetings in Geneva and the last online meeting two weeks ago.

During the meeting, Ghanem discussed several points related to the position of the Arab region group on a variety of issues including climate change, refugee and demographic changes in the world countries, in addition to discussing the developments of the novel coronavirus.

Parliamentarians from more than 15 countries representing geopolitical groups in the world participated in the meeting, in addition to the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Gabriela Cuevas Baron and the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Martin Chung Gong. — KUNA

Kuwaiti, Iraqi defense ministers hail strong ties

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and Iraqi counterpart Lt Gen Jumaa Saadoun lauded, in a phone conversation on Wednesday, strong Kuwaiti-Iraqi military relations. They also voiced readiness to upgrade bilateral military cooperation to achieve the security and stability of both countries and the whole region, according to a statement from the Kuwaiti ministry of defense. Sheikh Ahmad also congratulated Saadoun on his new post as the defense minister of Iraq, wishing him success in his mission. — KUNA



Jumaa Saadoun



Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah

Residents of social care homes healthy

KUWAIT: The ministry of social affairs affirmed Wednesday health conditions of residents and employees in social care homes are good. Undersecretary Abdulaziz Shuaib affirmed the wellbeing of residents and employees of social care homes, and said the ministry approached the health and safety conditions inside its facilities in a transparent manner.

He was reacting to social media reports regarding alleged negligence inside the social care sector that could undermine safety of residents and employees alike. Shuaib said the ministry, hand-in-hand with the ministry of health, was adopting all precautionary measures to prevent coronavirus infections or diseases in general. — KUNA

Kuwait Heritage



A woman inspects pots for sale while men relax in a coffee shop in this image from 1949. – Courtesy Mohd Zakaria Abu El Ella, Heritage Researcher, Ministry of Information. Source: Kuwait in the Eyes of Early Photographers

Coronavirus hits more co-ops as Indian nurse dies of virus

National Assembly considering virtual meetings

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: More cooperative societies have been closed after some of their workers tested positive for the coronavirus. After shutting Khaldiya and Adailiya co-ops, the main supermarkets of Daiya, Mansouriya, Nuzha, Shamiya and Mubarak Al-Kabeer and others were shut over the virus. The interior ministry meanwhile warned that people who do not abide by the health ministry decision to wear a facemask will be referred for interrogation.

The Blood Bank and Kuwait Nursing Association yesterday mourned the death of Indian nurse Annie Mathew after she contracted the coronavirus. Mathew, 54, returned from leave from her home in Kerala less than three months ago. She is the fourth medical staff to die of the coronavirus after two doctors from Egypt and India and a Filipina nurse reportedly died of the disease.

Meanwhile, the National Assembly is considering amendments that would allow holding virtual sessions in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said after

an informal meeting with MPs. The meeting was held immediately after cancelling a scheduled session because the government did not attend.

Ghanem said that there is a need to make amendments to the Assembly's charter to allow holding virtual sessions and work is ongoing to achieve that. He did not give a timeframe for completing the amendments but added that some panels like the financial and economic affairs committees are holding virtual meetings. The speaker said holding sessions is essential, but added that he will convey the opinions of MPs on several issues.

The Assembly session was scheduled to discuss a controversy over contracts signed by government departments during the coronavirus crisis and allegations that some of the contracts were inflated. Ghanem said that the Audit Bureau will make a presentation to lawmakers on Sunday on all contracts signed by the government during coronavirus crisis. The value of the contracts is estimated at just under KD 700 million.

MP Saadoun Hammad said MPs called during the meeting to end the school year and to resolve the problem of a number of Kuwaitis who



KUWAIT: Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem holds an informal meeting with MPs. — KUNA

have not been receiving salaries because of some procedural issues. A number of MPs also demanded a quick resolution of the issue of thousands of expats who were illegally living in the country and registered to benefit from an interior ministry amnesty.

Although over 25,000 expats registered in

the amnesty program, only 6,900 of them have departed for home, including 4,300 Egyptians and about 1,900 Filipinos. MP Yousef Al-Fadhalah said the government must resolve this issue quickly by applying more pressure on governments of guest workers to allow their repatriation.

Friday Times International

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For worshippers, shrine visits go virtual in virus-hit Iraq

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Trump: Fauci remarks on reopening schools and economy unacceptable

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WASHINGTON, DC: MoveOn.org stages a protest against the handling of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic by US President Donald Trump with signs and white roses to remember the people who died from the disease, near the US Capitol in Washington, DC — AFP

Coronavirus may never go away: WHO

COVID-19 toll nears 300,000; US deaths hit 84,059

GENEVA: The coronavirus may never go away and populations will have to learn to live with it just as they have HIV, the World Health Organization has warned, as the global death toll from the disease nears 300,000. There were also gloomy forecasts from the US Federal Reserve, which said prolonged shutdowns to stem the spread of the virus could cause lasting economic damage in America.

Washington ratcheted up tensions over the pandemic by accusing China of trying to steal research into a vaccine, while US President Donald Trump upped the rhetoric with a colorful phrase that could anger Beijing. "We just made a great Trade Deal, the ink was barely dry, and the World was hit by the Plague from China. 100 Trade Deals wouldn't make up the difference—and all those innocent lives lost!" Trump tweeted.

The United States logged more than 1,800 deaths on Wednesday, bringing the nation's total to 84,059. The president has increasingly looked to pin the blame on China, where the virus first emerged late last year. Two US security agencies piled further pressure on Beijing Wednesday by saying Chinese hackers were attempting to steal intellectual property related to treatments. "China's efforts to target

these sectors pose a significant threat to our nation's response to COVID-19," the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said.

Neither agency offered evidence to support the allegation.

'May never go away'

A vaccine could allow countries and economies to fully re-open from lockdowns and potentially earn millions of dollars for its creators. But the WHO said the virus may never be wiped out entirely.

"This virus may become just another endemic virus in our communities and this virus may never go away," said Michael Ryan, the global health body's emergencies director in Geneva. "HIV has not gone away—but we have come to terms with the virus."

The prospect of the disease hanging around leaves governments across the world facing a delicate balancing act between suppressing the pathogen and getting economies up and running. Trump has been pushing for a swift resumption of economic activity in the US, often against the advice of health officials, as he tries to jumpstart the world's largest economy before a November election. Top infectious

diseases expert Anthony Fauci has said re-opening too soon risks triggering uncontrollable outbreaks, but the president Wednesday dismissed that call for caution as "not acceptable".

In an excerpt of an interview with Fox Business to air in full yesterday, Trump said: "I totally disagree with him on schools." The tensions between health and the economy were thrown into sharp relief Wednesday when Federal Reserve chief Jay Powell warned of a potential "wave of bankruptcies" that could cause lasting harm.

Border controls

Re-opening of economies continued in earnest across Europe, with officials pushing ahead with plans to restore summer tourism even as fears persist of a second wave of infections. Desperate to save millions of jobs, the European Union set out proposals for a phased restart of travel, with border controls to be eventually lifted, along with measures to minimise transmission.

Some beaches re-opened in France on Wednesday—but only for swimming and fishing—and people in England were allowed to leave their homes more freely.—AFP

International

Temperature checks and masks, the new normal for air travel

Physical distancing could make flying more expensive: Dubai Airport CEO

DUBAI: Temperature screening and face masks will become common sights at airports to mitigate the spread of the new coronavirus but physical distancing could make flying more expensive, the head of Dubai airport said. Around the world, governments, airports and airlines are considering temporary safety measures to restart air travel, including mandatory temperature checks, wearing face masks and keeping passengers apart.

"We are going to have to take whatever measures are necessary to protect the travelling public and our staff," Chief Executive Paul Griffiths told Reuters. Dubai International, one of the world's busiest airports, suspended passenger services in late March as the United Arab Emirates took drastic measures to contain the virus.

The UAE has since allowed some repatriation flights and eased other restrictions in the Gulf state, though it is not clear when normal flights will restart.

Temporary safety measures should be expected as flights resume but Griffiths cautioned physical distancing rules would eventually limit growth as demand rebounds. "We will not be

able to operate at anything close to our original design capacity if we had to maintain social distancing," he said.

Dubai airport, the hub of airline Emirates, was handling Airbus A380s with over 600 passengers before the virus forced the airport to halt flights. Physical distancing could also increase airfares if airlines were restricted to selling fewer tickets in order to keep some seats empty, Griffiths said.

Fit to travel

But until there was a vaccine, treatment or reliable, quick method to detect the virus, measures that reduce the risk of contagion would need to be enforced, Griffiths said. It is unclear when global travel will recover from the pandemic which has shattered demand and will partially depend on countries lifting their lockdowns. Regaining public confidence in the safety of air travel is seen by the aviation industry as a significant challenge.

Countries that have the spread of the virus under control and agree to reopen their borders to each other are likely to drive air travel demand



DUBAI: A pilot of an Emirates Airlines flight from London arrives at Dubai International Airport. — AFP

over the near term, Griffiths said, but it is impossible to say when travel could return to pre-pandemic levels. Passenger traffic at Dubai airport

fell by a fifth in the first quarter to 17.8 million as countries closed their borders due to the coronavirus outbreak. — Reuters

Egypt leverages 'soft power' via medical aid

CAIRO: A slickly produced video from the office of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi showed crates of medical supplies—stamped in English and Arabic with the words "from the Egyptian people to the American people"—being loaded onto a military cargo plane.

The dramatically scored video released last month was Egypt's latest attempt to project soft power globally by sending medical aid to countries that have included China, Italy, Sudan and the United Kingdom. But analysts described these gestures of political goodwill as tokenistic at a time when Egypt's own healthcare system is overstretched.

In March—before the pandemic had claimed over 296,000 lives—Egypt's health minister Hala Zayed was the first minister from abroad to visit Beijing since the outbreak began. Zayed then appeared weeks later in a choreographed trip to Italy, an early European epicentre of the virus, personally delivering masks and gloves to the foreign minister.

Egyptians quickly lampooned her on social media, with one popular joke noting that Sisi was sending Zayed on mercy missions abroad hoping to get rid of her over her handling of the health crisis.

Pundits online also criticized her ministry for ignoring shortages of personal protective equip-

ment (PPE) among healthcare workers in Egypt. "Health diplomacy has been one of the traditional strategies for global south states who seek to have a more prominent role in the global arena," Gerasimos Tsourapas, a political scientist at the University of Birmingham, said. "I read this as a short-term strategy that may not be necessarily thought through to the end, given Egypt's growing needs for protective equipment."

"In terms of soft power, Egypt tends to prioritise foreign policy considerations over domestic ones," Tsourapas added. Egypt's confirmed COVID-19 cases have reached nearly 10,500 with over 550 fatalities, including nine doctors and six nurses. But some observers say the real toll could be much higher due to low levels of testing.

'No lasting impact'

Last month, Egypt sent the United States a C-130 military plane loaded with medical equipment. It was a striking role reversal for a country which is a leading recipient of American aid, receiving about \$1.3 billion annually. The plane brought 200,000 masks, 48,000 shoe covers and 20,000 surgical caps among other supplies, said Dutch Ruppertsberger, a Democrat in the US House of Representatives who heads a bipartisan group promoting relations with Egypt.

"This is why international diplomacy and maintaining relationships with allies like Egypt are essential not in times of crisis, but every day," he wrote on Twitter. But Yezid Sayigh, an expert on Egypt's military at Carnegie's Middle East Centre in Beirut, suggested the donation reflected the Sisi administration's "special fondness for PR gestures and rhetoric".

Sayigh said the message behind Egypt's



In this file photo, Egypt's Health Minister Hala Zayed (center) inspects moored river boats along the coast of the Nile in the southern city of Luxor. A slickly produced video from Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's office, complemented by a dramatic score, showed in April crates of medical supplies in wrapping that read in English and Arabic, "from the Egyptian people to the American people," being loaded onto a military cargo plane. — AFP

global outreach was intended to "buttress its claims about its superior wisdom and capability and its demands for respect domestically". But such moves were unlikely to have a lasting impact on Egypt's image abroad, Sayigh said.

"What will impress others is success in containing COVID-19 and getting the economy back on its feet," he added. "Foreign audience, domestic consumption" -

Since assuming power in 2014, following the military overthrow of former Islamist president Mohamed Morsi the year before, general-turned-president Sisi has cultivated personal re-

lationships with US President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

These friendships have translated into considerable arms purchases, with Egypt ranking third globally in weapons imports. Last week, the State Department cleared the way for Egypt to refurbish 43 Apache helicopters in a deal worth \$2.3 billion. The military plays an outsized role in Egyptian public life, with activities ranging from building highways and producing Ramadan soap operas to most recently selling personal PPE to citizens. — AFP

International

For worshippers, shrine visits go virtual in virus-hit Iraq

Iraq reported over 3,000 infections, more than 110 deaths

NAJAF: Every year, Maher al-Rubaye would marvel at the gold-leaf walls of Iraq's Imam Ali mausoleum. He still visits the shrine today—through a screen from his living room.

The spread of the new coronavirus in Iraq has prompted the closure of major mosques to visitors, including the ornate burial place of Ali, the fourth Islamic caliph and relative of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), in the shrine city Najaf. Just a few hundred meters from the mausoleum, Rubaye—at home because of lockdown measures—extends one hand towards the sky in prayer and holds his mobile phone with the other.

On the screen flash images of the shrine: its large plaza, the marble floors and intricate calligraphy—and finally, the glittering mausoleum itself. “I visit you, Commander of the Faithful,” Rubaye recites, adding a COVID-19-mandated amendment: “...from a distance.” Iraq has reported over 3,000 coronavirus infections and more than 110 deaths since its first case was recorded nearly three months ago in Najaf. Authorities have since imposed a nationwide lockdown that has shut airports, restaurants and schools and prohibited travel between provinces.

‘Valid’ visit

The pandemic has battered Iraq's religious tourism sector, which constitutes around half of

its non-oil economy. A normal year would see millions of Shiite pilgrims visit shrines in Najaf and nearby Karbala, travelling from neighboring Iran or even India. The billions of dollars generated from pilgrims annually creates jobs for hundreds of thousands of Iraqis—constituting almost the only form of tourism in a country ravaged by decades of conflict.

But the narrow alleyways radiating out from the shrines, typically bustling with locals and tourists en route to prayer, are now eerily empty. Wooden stalls where religious trinkets and other souvenirs are usually laid out have been shrouded in plastic for weeks. The sounds of an occasional tweeting bird and the call to prayer five times daily—followed by an addendum to do so at home to avoid crowds—have replaced the din of bartering, clinking coffee cups and shuffling feet. “In these current circumstances, with the confinement imposed by governments across the world, virtual pilgrimages are as valid as the normal ones,” said Ali Al-Atabi, a sheikh in Najaf's Old City.

Religious tourism had already seen a dip since October, when anti-government protests erupted in Baghdad and across the country's Shiite-majority south.

Old rites, new tech

The closures are particularly jarring as most

the worst-off in the Arab world's poorest nation.

Yemen's health system has all but collapsed since the conflict broke out in 2014, with some 20 million people—more than two thirds of the population—needing aid to survive, according to the United Nations.

‘No way to tell’

The government has so far reported 65 coronavirus cases, including 10 deaths.

The Houthi rebels, who control much of the north including the capital Sanaa, have announced two infections, including one death. However, an official in the government's interim capital of Aden said the number of cases could be much higher. “Seventy people died of various diseases in Aden in the 24 hours between Sunday and Monday,” the official, who works in the government's crisis response unit, told AFP.

“It could be from the coronavirus... but in the absence of international organizations and testing, there is no way to tell,” said the official, who asked to remain nameless. The government has accused the Houthis of covering up cases, as Yemenis increasingly clamour for the two parties to set aside the conflict and focus on combatting the pandemic. Around 3.3 million people have been displaced, forced to live in abandoned schools or camps where diseases such as cholera run rampant due to the scarcity of clean water and medication. Aden resident Saddam Bijash complained he had not seen “any tangible measures” to curb the disease. “We expect the virus to spread and for a disaster that no one will be



NAJAF: Numan Al-Saadi, a resident of Najaf, visits the Imam Ali shrine through his phone in Iraq's central holy city of Najaf. — AFP

shrines remained open during the bloodiest years of Iraq's sectarian violence, which saw suicide bombers target religious sites and densely populated neighborhoods.

But over time, some shrines have developed new ways for the faithful to experience a centuries-old tradition. TV channels air round-the-clock images from the mausoleums, and in Najaf,

a hotline provides a free audio guide to visit the site. “Salam aleikum”—peace be upon you—a male voice says in a recorded message, reciting the typical Muslim greeting in Arabic.

“Welcome to a pilgrimage of Imam Ali,” it continues, pausing for the caller to recite the prayer intoned upon entering the shrine in real life. —AFP

Fear of virus grows in Yemen's squalid camps

KHOKHA, Yemen: In a desolate camp for Yemenis displaced by war, Nasima Ahmed wonders how she and her four children can possibly protect themselves as the novel coronavirus stalks the country. The five-year-old conflict between the government and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels has pushed millions to the brink of famine in a country ill-prepared to face the new health threat. “We are not ready for the coronavirus because we have nothing,” Ahmed told AFP at her tent, which is practically empty except for two ragged foam mattresses.

“We need to be able to store food in case a quarantine is imposed,” she said. “I am afraid. I am scared for my children since this virus may lead to our deaths.”

Squalid camps for internally displaced people like the one where Ahmed lives in Khokha, outside the Red Sea port city of Hodeida, are ideal breeding grounds for disease, with little chance of proper sanitation or social distancing. Since the first COVID-19 cases were reported in Yemen last month, anxiety has grown among those living in tents—fashioned from canvas, branches and scraps of plastic—who are among



In this file photo, workers of Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC) prepare to drain sewage water from camp flooded by rainwater for Yemenis displaced by conflict from Ta'ez, Ibb, and Hodeida, and currently residing in the Khor Maksar district of the second city of Aden. — AFP

able to control,” he told AFP.

‘Like wildfire’

Caroline Seguin from Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned the coronavirus could spread “very quickly” in overcrowded cities and camps. “People there often live with many family members in a small space, and camps mostly lack

adequate hygiene measures, making it difficult for them to isolate themselves or to wash their hands,” said Seguin, MSF's head of programs in Yemen, Iraq and Jordan. “Displaced people are also often poor, making it impossible for them just to stay at home while the virus is circulating—they need to go out to earn or collect the basic necessities of life.” — AFP

International

Russian medics ask where Putin's virus bonuses went

Overworked Russian health workers see no sign of promised sums

MOSCOW: Maria, a 24-year-old doctor working outside Moscow, expected to be paid extra if one of her patients tested positive for the coronavirus. Instead, her salary shrank. In a small town 200 kilometers (120 miles) from the capital, she visits patients at home and normally has around three calls a day. But that number surged to 30 in April as the pandemic struck Russia.

When President Vladimir Putin promised on TV in April that doctors would get a monthly bonus of 80,000 rubles (\$1,100) for treating virus patients, she thought it was compensation for increased risk and workload. "I hoped that if I came in contact with the infection, I would also get some extra money," said Maria, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, fearing she could damage her career prospects.

What happened was quite different. After a patient she visited and swabbed tested positive, Maria was ordered to self-isolate for two weeks. When she got her April salary, it was cut to just 14,000 rubles. Her salary varies from month to month, but the most she makes is 36,000 rubles, working two different jobs and overtime, she said.

"I could have contracted the virus, but instead of a bonus, my salary is less than usual," said Maria, who was only given one surgical mask and a pair of gloves per shift. Healthcare workers across Russia watched Putin promise doctors extra pay and monthly bonuses of between 25,000 and 80,000 rubles to medics and drivers working to fight coronavirus. But when overworked doctors opened their April pay slips, most saw no sign of these generous sums.

Many posted photos online of pay cheques where the extra money amounted to \$10 dollars or less—or nothing at all. On Wednesday, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin acknowledged the problem.

The government has transferred 27 billion rubles for healthcare bonuses, but regional authorities have only paid out 4.5 billion, he said. "There are problems with payments even in regions most hit by the infection, where the workload on medics is at the maximum," he admitted. With more than 242,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and cases steadily rising, Russia has the world's second-highest number of infections. Andrei Konoval, head of the Action union of medical workers, said Putin's directive lost its punch as it percolated through the healthcare system's bureaucracy. Some hospitals only added certain staff to "coronavirus teams", so when others, like Maria, faced the virus they were not eligible for the bonus.

In some regions, facilities calculated time in contact with the infection down to the minute to save money. Ambulance crews at some hospitals would only get paid extra for treating confirmed coronavirus cases. "In reality, ambulance teams going out on a call about high blood pressure risk infection even more," because they have less protection and patients do not know if they are infected, Konoval said. Putin's bonus promise had sounded "very attractive", he said, "but it has resulted in huge disappointment among doctors."

That feeling has compounded frustration in the medical community that they are taken for granted, especially after a recent cycle of



MOSCOW: People walk past a poster on a wall of a hospital reading in Russian "Heros - Medics" in Moscow amid the spread of the COVID-19 infection caused by the novel coronavirus. — AFP

"optimisation" reforms that closed thousands of clinics. "This looks like a cruel joke to medical workers" already used to unfulfilled promises, says a petition launched last week by the Action union, which is demanding full payouts.— AFP

UK in talks with Roche on COVID-19 tests

LONDON: Britain is in talks with Swiss drugmaker Roche Holding AG on rolling out an accurate COVID-19 antibody test that it said could be a 'game changer' on getting the world's fifth largest economy back to work. The novel coronavirus, which emerged in China, has propelled the world towards the sharpest recession in centuries with many people isolating at home as governments grapple with one of the biggest health crises since the 1918 influenza epidemic.

The British government said it was talking with Roche on rolling out its test after a Public Health England laboratory at Porton Down, in Wiltshire, concluded it had 100 percent specificity. That means it can detect antibodies to the exact disease rather than similar ones.

"This has the potential to be a game changer," said Edward Argar, Britain's junior health minister.

"We are now moving as fast as we can to discuss with Roche purchasing of those but I can't give you an exact date when we'll be able to start rolling them out." The Roche test received a conformity assessment, known as Conformité Européenne, or CE mark, from the European Union on April 28 and received Emergency Use Authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration on May 2.

Before the Porton Down laboratory's results, the United Kingdom had said no COVID-19 antibody test was accurate enough to use. "This is a very positive development because such a highly specific anti-body test is a very reliable marker of past infection," said John Newton, national coordinator of the UK Coronavirus Testing Program.

"Scientific experts at PHE Porton Down carried out an independent evaluation of the new Roche SARS-CoV-2 serology assay in record time, concluding that it is a highly specific assay with specificity of 100 percent."



Blood test

Roche said late on Wednesday it was in talks with the National Health Service and the UK government about a phased roll-out of antibody test kits as soon as possible and would be able to provide hundreds of thousands of the test kits per week. "The test requires a blood sample to be taken by a qualified healthcare professional and processed in a laboratory," Roche said, adding that it was one of the most accurate tests on the market with over 99.8 specificity.

"This level of accuracy is vitally important because there are a number of viruses with very similar antibodies to Covid-19, including the common cold, and other SARS strains, which can produce a positive result in some less accurate antibody tests."

The Telegraph, which first reported the findings, said the government was in negotiations with Roche to buy millions of kits. Similar antibody tests have also been developed by companies including U.S.-based Abbott Laboratories and Italy's DiaSorin.

Unlike tests to diagnose diseases, antibody tests show who has been infected, although it is not yet clear whether that confers permanent immunity. — Reuters

12 'terrorism' suspects dead in Burkina prison

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso: Twelve people detained on suspicion of terrorism were found dead in their police cells in west of Burkina Faso, the local prosecutor said on Wednesday. The prosecutor for the town of Fada N'Gourma said in a statement that 25 people had been detained overnight Monday and "unfortunately, 12 of them have died during the course of the night in the cells they were being held in." An investigation has been launched and officers of the judicial police are at the scene as well as health officials, the statement said. Security sources contacted by AFP said that "only the investigation can determine the cause" of the deaths, but one possible explanation was asphyxiation. Independent sources told AFP that most of those detained were ethnic Fula, who are regularly accused of having links with jihadist groups.

In July 2019, 11 people suspected of drug trafficking were found dead in a single cell while in custody of the national police's drugs squad. In that case, the heads of the squad were relieved of their duties and an investigation was launched.

Burkina Faso's security forces have regularly been accused of mistreating Fula people. On May 2, a Fula teacher was found dead in a police station in Ouagadougou, according to the Burkinabe human rights organisation, MBDHP.

Suspected of having links with terrorist groups, he had been arrested on April 23 in Absouya in the west of the country. Between December and January, at least four people, all Fula, were "victims of forced disappearances" in Ouagadougou, MBDHP said.

The Burkinabe army, as well as vigilante groups have also been accused of killing Fula civilians in the north and east of the country in the wake of jihadist violence. — AFP

International

Trump: Fauci remarks on reopening schools and economy unacceptable

US accuses China-linked hackers of stealing virus research

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday described as not acceptable a warning given by top US infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci this week about the dangers of reopening the economy and schools too quickly. "To me it's not an acceptable answer, especially when it comes to schools," Trump told reporters at the White House when asked about Fauci's warnings to senators on Tuesday about the risks of reopening the schools and economy too soon.

Fauci, who directs the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, also warned that a premature lifting of lockdowns could lead to additional outbreaks of the deadly coronavirus, which has killed more than 82,000 people in the United States and brought the economy to its knees. Trump, in contrast, said on Wednesday the only thing that would be acceptable would be professors or teachers "over a certain age" not holding classes. "I think they ought to take it easy for another few weeks," he added. The president, who previously made the strength of the economy central to his pitch for re-election in November, has encouraged states to reopen businesses and schools that were shuttered to halt the spread of the highly contagious respiratory disease.

Fauci, 79, a proponent of the lockdowns, has become a target for criticism from the American far right and online conspiracy theorists since he made statements about the outbreak that were at odds with Trump's.

In April, Trump retweeted a call to fire Fauci, after the doctor said lives could have been saved if the country had shut down sooner, spurring

speculation his days in the administration could be numbered.

"Anthony is a good person, a very good person, I've disagreed with him," Trump said in an interview earlier on Wednesday with Fox Business Network's "Mornings with Maria," repeating his refrain that the country must reopen. "We want to do it safely, but we also want to do it as quickly as possible. ... We have to get it open. I totally disagree with him on schools," Trump said. Asked about Trump's comments, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio told CNN that Fauci was "sounding an honest voice of caution and I share his view." "I think we have to be very careful about the steps we take."

China-linked hackers are breaking into American organizations carrying out research into COVID-19, US officials said on Wednesday, warning both scientists and public health officials to be on the lookout for cyber theft. In a joint statement, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security said the FBI was investigating digital break-ins at US organizations by China-linked "cyber actors" that it had monitored "attempting to identify and illicitly obtain valuable intellectual property (IP) and public health data related to vaccines, treatments, and testing from networks and personnel affiliated with COVID-19-related research."

The statement offered no further details on the identities of the targets or the hackers. The Chinese Embassy in Washington condemned the allegations as "lies."

"The FBI issued a warning based on presumption of guilt and without any evidence," the



WASHINGTON, DC: US Senator Lisa Murkowski, US Senator Mike Braun, US Senator Rand Paul listen as Dr Anthony Fauci answers questions during the Senate Committee for Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions hearing on COVID-19 on Wednesday.—AFP

embassy said in a written statement, adding the US accusation "undercuts the ongoing international cooperation against the pandemic." Coronavirus-related research and data have emerged as a key intelligence priority for hackers of all stripes and Western intelligence organizations have repeatedly sounded the alarm over the targeting of public health and pharmaceutical organizations.

In a separate statement issued earlier on Wednesday, the head of New Zealand's signals intelligence agency said it condemned any attempt to target COVID response-related infrastructure. "We call upon all cyber actors to

refrain from activity that may jeopardise national or international responses to the COVID-19 pandemic," said Andrew Hampton, the director-general of New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau.

Last week Reuters reported that Iran-linked cyberspies had targeted staff at US drugmaker Gilead Sciences Inc., whose antiviral drug remdesivir is the only treatment so far proven to help COVID-19 patients.

In March and April, Reuters reported on advanced hackers' attempts to break into the World Health Organization as the pandemic spread across the globe.—Reuters

Care home residents get visits via 'box of emotions'

MONTIJO, Portugal: Maria das Mercês struggled to hold back tears after she saw her 90-year-old father at a Portuguese care home - chatting to him from inside a glass booth erected in front of a window to allow elderly residents to visit family during the coronavirus pandemic. "Makes you want to hold him," Mercês, 63, told Reuters after a 15-minute visit to the "box of emotions", as the contraption is known.

"I don't think I would be able to resist if the glass window wasn't here." Opened earlier this month at the Montepio nursing home in the town of Montijo across the River Tagus from Lisbon, the air-conditioned glass box sits outside the building alongside one of the rooms. Residents can sit and talk with their relatives using

a microphone set up on both sides.

Mercês is one of the many Portuguese with relatives in care homes who are finding it tough to cope with a ban on visits imposed to protect the frail residents from contagion as part of a lockdown declared nearly two months ago. Around 14% of the around 2,500 care homes in Portugal reported coronavirus cases, according to the government.

Portugal, which has reported more than 28,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and 1,175 deaths - a fraction of the toll in neighboring Spain, started to ease the lockdown on May 4. Care homes will start to open doors again on May 18 under restrictions, including social distancing between visitors and residents.

Chief nurse Patricia Soares believes

care homes should remain shut for longer to protect the vulnerable group. "We want to keep the virus out," she said.

More than 90 elderly people live at the Montepio care home, with many suffering from dementia, making it hard for some to understand why they were not able to see their relatives.

"There were people who didn't understand it, some still don't and think their families abandoned them," said care home president Pedro Santos. "The 'box of emotions' brought joy."

Fatima Sousa, 58, has already used the box three times to visit her 89-year-old aunt Rosa Gordo. "When we got in and saw her on the other side with her hand on the glass...it was not easy and it's still not easy," said a tearful Sousa.—Reuters

EU hopes COVID vaccine will be ready in 2021

AMSTERDAM: A vaccine to counter the new coronavirus could be approved in about a year in an "optimistic" scenario, an agency which approves medicines for the European Union said yesterday. The European Medicines Agency, in communication with 33 developers, was doing all it could to speed up the approval process, the EMA's head of vaccines, Marco Cavaleri, said, but he was skeptical of claims any could be ready by September.

"For vaccines, since the development has to start from scratch ... we might look from an optimistic side in a year from now, so beginning of 2021," he told journalists. He ruled out the possibility of skipping the third phase of a vaccine trial, which he said would be needed to be sure a vaccine was safe and effective.

The EMA is also looking at 115 different therapeutics, or treatments, for the coronavirus, which has killed nearly 300,000 deaths globally, according to World Health Organization data. Cavaleri said some of those therapeutics could be approved in Europe as early as this summer, but he did not specify which.—Reuters

International

'Total' lockdown for Chile capital after virus spike

Chile also has Latin America's highest rate of coronavirus testing

SANTIAGO: Chile ordered a mandatory total quarantine for the capital Santiago's seven million people Wednesday after authorities reported a 60 percent spike in coronavirus infections in 24 hours, dealing a stunning blow to hopes the economy would soon reopen.

"The most severe measure I must announce is a total quarantine in Greater Santiago," the location of 80 percent of the country's 34,000-plus confirmed cases, Health Minister Jaime Manalich said.

Manalich said the lockdown — including in several areas where earlier confinement measures had been lifted — was necessary after 2,260 new infections and 12 deaths in the last 24 hours.

The announcement follows a government request to the IMF for a flexible line of credit amounting to around \$23.8 billion for the next two years.

The credit line would help kickstart the economy after months of mass protests against the government of President Sebastian Pinera, a bodyblow to state revenues exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

'Battle of Santiago'

The lockdown — which come into force on Friday at 10:00 pm (0200 GMT Saturday) — means that people will be allowed to leave their homes only for essential reasons like buying food or medicine.

Chile had until now opted for a selective

quarantine strategy in dealing with the pandemic. Curfews were imposed in Santiago and other cities, but quarantines were limited to areas with high incidences of infection.

Chile also has Latin America's highest rate of coronavirus testing — 14,000 a day and around 200,000 overall.

However, the government had been increasingly concerned about rising infection numbers across the city of seven million people in the past 10 days, and last week ordered strict new confinement measures in three densely populated areas.

Health workers reported growing rates of infection in early May, just after the conservative government celebrated the fact that infections had "peaked," citing a persistent daily rate of around 500 new cases.

Within a few days, however, officials began to speak of "The Battle of Santiago."

"The month of May is being hard on our country and we have to take appropriate actions at the right time to stop this disease," Manalich said.

He added that the health system was able to cope, as deaths remain low, with 347 from COVID-19 since March 3.

Health authorities said the South American country had 553 ventilators available as of Wednesday, and more units would be added in the coming days.

The minister also announced that the government was imposing a mandatory quarantine on



SANTIAGO: A police member check two passers-by at Plaza de Armas square, in Santiago, after the government ordered a mandatory total quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. —AFP

people over 75 years of age in the northern cities of Iquique and Alto Hospicio.

The government responded quickly to the first cases on March 3, introducing a nationwide cur-

few and selective quarantines on areas with high incidences of the virus. Schools, universities and businesses were closed as part of social distancing measures and transport restricted. —AFP

Washington mayor extends lockdown

WASHINGTON: Washington's mayor extended the US capital's lockdown Wednesday amid a stream of new coronavirus cases, even as many parts of the country gradually reopen in a push to prevent further economic damage.

The orders extend the city's home sheltering regime, which was set to expire today, to June 8, and came as similar measures were granted for the city's suburbs in the states of Maryland and Virginia. The two states are gradually reopening their economies, but have permitted communities near the capital — population: 700,000 — to open under different timelines, due to heightened levels of COVID-19.

"The number of new daily cases of COVID-19 diagnoses has yet to fall and the number of daily deaths has failed to decline," Mayor Muriel Bowser said in her proclamation.

"Community transmission of COVID-19 remains widespread throughout the district," she said, as well as "in the Maryland and Virginia areas near Washington."

The capital alone has seen 6,584 cases and 350 deaths, numbers that do not take into account statistics from the vast, surrounding suburbs. The capital's steady infection

rate comes as some cities, such as New York, the nation's coronavirus epicenter, have seen a decline in cases, and as a patchwork of states have reopened business to varying degrees.

In her orders, Bowser said that "the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths are below previous projections. Still, the district has not yet met the criteria for reopenings."

On Monday, the Washington mayor inaugurated a 437-bed temporary hospital at the city's Walter E. Washington Convention Center, adding that she hoped "we never get to the point of needing to use this site. Maryland's Republican Governor Larry Hogan, meanwhile announced a lift to the state's stay-at-home orders as of Friday.

But, he told reporters that "we fully understand that not all counties are in the same situation." Two of the counties directly outside the district, Prince George's and Montgomery, had indicated they were not ready to reopen, he said. The state of Virginia, to the south of Washington, will begin a limited reopening on Friday as well, according to Governor Ralph Northam.

However the area surrounding Washington was excluded from the plan, and given a two-week delay. Americans across the country have staged anti-lockdown demonstrations and President Donald Trump has pressed for rapid steps to rekindle the devastated US economy before a November election. —AFP

Maduro claims Guaido planned Venezuela 'invasion'

CARACAS: Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro alleged Wednesday that opposition leader Juan Guaido met with a former member of the US Army special forces at the White House to plan a failed sea invasion of the Caribbean country.

Maduro claimed the meeting occurred when Guaido, the legislative leader who is supported by the US and around fifty other countries as the interim president of Venezuela, visited the US president in Washington in February.

"It was at the White House on February 4 of this year, 2020, that Juan Guaido met with Jordan Goudreau" the leftist leader said, referring to the former special forces member who Venezuela has alleged organized and trained a mercenary force to carry out the invasion. The meeting, Maduro said, was "at the order of Donald Trump to come up with the plan of attack." According to Maduro, "it would be very easy to verify" Goudreau's presence at the White House between 2019 and 2020 and "in which room he met with Mr Guaido." —AFP

International

Truck bomb in eastern Afghan city kills five, 14 injured

Taliban say ready to fight attacking Afghan forces

JALALABAD/KABUL: A truck packed with explosives blew up near a court in the eastern Afghan city of Gardez yesterday, killing at least five people, two days after gunmen attacked a maternity ward in the capital Kabul, killing women and newborn babies.

"A car bomb explosion took place near a military court in Gardez city, which is a populated area. Dozens of civilians are feared to be dead and wounded," said Tariq Arian, an interior ministry spokesman.

Emal Khan Momand, a military spokesman in Paktia province where Gardez is located, said the attack was carried out by a truck packed with explosives. Five people were killed and 14 were wounded, he said. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast. Arian blamed the militant Haqqani network, which has ties to Taliban rebels and the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group. These groups rarely publicly claim responsibility for attacks.

The blast comes after a violent week in which gunmen attacked a maternity hospital in Kabul, killing 24 people, including new mothers and newborn babies, on Tuesday. A suicide blast claimed by the Islamic State at a funeral in eastern Nangahar on the same day killed 32.

President Ashraf Ghani condemned the attacks and said he had ordered the military to switch to offensive mode rather than the defensive stance it

had adopted as the United States withdraws troops and tries to broker talks with the Taliban.

The Taliban has denied any involvement in the attacks, but the government has accused the group of fostering an environment in which terrorism thrives or working with other militant groups who could have been involved, straining efforts by the United States to bring the insurgents and the Afghan government together.

The Taliban on Wednesday said they were prepared to battle Afghan forces after the president told troops to resume offensive operations following grisly attacks that have further unravelled a fragile peace process.

New details have emerged on Tuesday's assault on a Kabul maternity hospital, where at least 24 people including infants, mothers and nurses were killed. The daylight attack was followed by a blast at a funeral in the country's east that killed 32 mourners.

According to international humanitarian organisation Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), or Doctors Without Borders, which runs the maternity wing at the Barchi Hospital in west Kabul, one woman gave birth during the lengthy attack.

"While pregnant women and babies were seeking health care in one of the most vulnerable states in life ... attackers stormed the maternity (unit) through a series of explosions and gunfire lasting for hours," MSF said in a statement.

since 1993, for which the country was largely unprepared. Farmers now have little confidence the government will help them fight a new wave of voracious insects threatening their harvests – though officials said extensive measures were being taken.

"Neither the central, nor the provincial government is doing anything about it," said Bhurgri, who grows vegetables, red chillies, cotton and sugarcane on about 600 acres of land.

'PERFECT SETTING'

The locusts arrived in Pakistan from Iran in June 2019, devouring cotton, wheat and maize, among other crops.

The invasion was initially expected to subside by mid-November. But it has persisted due to favourable weather conditions for continued locust breeding, linked to global warming, according to FAO's Pakistan office.

"Good vegetation due to plentiful rain and a sandy soil provided a perfect setting for the insects to multiply," said Muhammad Tariq Khan, technical director at the Department of Plant Protection in the Ministry of National Food Security and Research.

In a recent letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah warned of a "massive locust attack" expected on local farmland when swarms from Iran reach his province in mid-May, which could "prove more harmful" than last year's invasion.

With little time to waste, farmer Bhurgri decided to take matters into his own hands and "fight the locusts myself".

Using a power sprayer fixed on a tractor, he plans to douse them with pesticides while they rest on trees at



GARDEZ: A wounded Afghan National Army (ANA) soldier rests inside a hospital after an attack on Afghan army base in Gardez, capital of Paktia province yesterday. —AFP

The group said at least one Afghan colleague appeared to have been among those killed in the "revolting" attack.

President Ashraf Ghani blamed both that assault and the funeral bombing on the Taliban and the Islamic State group, ordering Afghan troops to "resume their operations against the enemy".

For weeks Afghan forces had been on a "defen-

sive" posture to ease peace talks with the Taliban.

But the insurgents, who denied involvement in Tuesday's attacks, warned they were "fully prepared" to counter any strikes by Afghan forces.

"From now onwards the responsibility of further escalation of violence and its ramifications shall fall squarely on the shoulders of the Kabul administration," the Taliban said in a statement. —Reuters

Pakistan readies for second battle against crop-devouring locusts

KARACHI: To many farmers in southeast Pakistan, an impending locust attack when summer crops of cotton, sugarcane and rice are being sown, and fruit and vegetables are ready to be picked is a much bigger problem than the coronavirus pandemic.

"If the crops are eaten up by the locusts, we will have a dire food security issue on our hands," said Zahid Bhurgri, a farmer from Mirpur Khas district in Sindh province.

"The price of flour and vegetables will sky-rocket," making staple foods hard for some to afford, added Bhurgri, who is also general secretary of the Sindh Chamber of Agriculture.

The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates losses to agriculture from locusts this year could be as high as PKR 353 billion (\$2.2 billion) for winter crops like wheat and potatoes and about PKR 464 billion for summer crops.

A May update from the FAO warned it would be "imperative" to contain and control the desert locust infestation in the midst of the additional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on health, livelihoods, food security and nutrition for Pakistan's most poor and vulnerable communities.

Last year, Pakistan suffered its worst attack of locusts

night, and get his farmhands to clang pots and pans during the day to drive the pests from his land.

But there are many small-scale farmers who lack the means to deal with the locusts on their own, he added.

Some do not feel confident enough to invest in their crop this year or are cutting costs by not using the required amount of fertiliser, he noted.

CLIMATE CONNECTION

Mubarak Ahmed, national coordinator for locust control at FAO's office in Karachi, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that Pakistan had been taken by surprise last year when locusts wreaked havoc in all its four provinces.

Unprecedented rains that led to vegetation cover in Sindh's Tharparkar desert had enabled the locusts to breed and then attack crop areas, he said.

The country was "relatively better prepared" to meet the challenge this year, he added. But the situation could get worse with huge swarms expected to arrive in the coming two to three months from Iran, Oman and the Horn of Africa.

Locust swarms are not new in East Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. But climate scientists say erratic weather linked to climate change has created ideal conditions for the insects to surge in numbers not seen in a quarter of a century.

Warmer seas have led to more cyclones in the Indian Ocean, causing heavy rainfall along the Arabian Peninsula and in the Horn of Africa, producing the perfect environment for breeding.

Experts say insect populations have found new homes across Pakistan and are now laying eggs in nearly

40% of its territory, including Sindh but mainly in the southwest province of Balochistan.

FAO locust forecaster Keith Cressman said locusts that had unusually stayed in parts of Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Indus Valley during the winter would now move southeast to their summer breeding areas in the Cholistan and Tharparkar deserts from May to July. Swarms breeding in Pakistan's deserts will likely be joined by others from southern Iran in a few weeks, with more likely to arrive from the Horn of Africa around July, experts predict.

The swarms are expected to be much larger than in 2019, because their numbers increase on average 20-fold with each generation. They travel in swarms of between 30 million to 50 million insects, covering a distance of 150 km (93 miles) and devouring 200 tonnes of crops per day.

NATIONAL PLAN

Khan of the Department of Plant Protection, who is the state's focal point for locust control, said the government had been preparing for the next wave of locusts since last year.

In January, the ministry shared a national action plan for surveillance and control of the desert locusts with the prime minister, who declared the locust attacks a national emergency in February.

That helped drive things forward with funding, surveillance and control operations, coordinated with provincial agriculture departments, the National Disaster Management Authority, the FAO and the army, said Khan. —Reuters

Crewcuts and catch-ups as New Zealand lockdown ends

PM Ardern hoping to catch up with her family face to face

WELLINGTON: New Zealanders mingled with friends and hit the shopping malls for the first time in seven weeks yesterday as a national lockdown ended and businesses faced a “new normal” minimizing the constant threat of coronavirus.

A long-awaited haircut was the top priority for many Kiwis after almost two months in isolation, with queues of tangle-headed customers forming at barbers before dawn.

Retailers, restaurants, malls, cinemas, cafes, gyms and playgrounds were all allowed to reopen after the government relaxed COVID-19 restrictions. The lockdown was among the tightest in the world and helped New Zealand become one of the most successful countries in containing the epidemic.

Yesterday’s changes, which put New Zealand at Level Two on its four-tier alert system, also allow Kiwis to break their quarantine “bubble” and meet up with friends and wider family members. “People are looking to get back to normal and being at Level Two will allow everybody to at least function to a degree,” retailer Mike Leigh told AFP.

Downtown streets in Wellington were once again jammed with traffic, although the usual crush on the capital’s commuter trains was non-existent. Instead, red and green stickers were plastered on seats, indicating where passengers could sit while still maintaining social distancing.

The city’s main railway station smelled strongly of disinfectant as cleaners mopped and scrubbed between each influx of office workers. Outside the station, Leigh stood at a makeshift stall selling brightly coloured face masks at NZ\$15 (US\$9) apiece.

A carpenter by trade, he has not worked at his regular job since the lockdown began and spotted a gap in the market for facemasks, which were seldom worn in New Zealand before the pandemic.

“It’s been going pretty good, I’ve sold about eight or 10 of them this morning, my wife makes them,” he said, adding “we’ll probably have to get a website”.

At the suburban Queensgate shopping mall, there was extra security to ensure crowds did not congregate too closely before retailers raised their shutters for the first since late March.

Shops prominently displayed the maximum number of customers allowed inside alongside signs proclaiming “one in, one out”. New Zealand, with a population of five million, has recorded only 21 coronavirus deaths and kept new cases to single figures over the past month.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she was hoping to catch up with her family face to face.

“I’m actually really looking forward to giving my sister a hug. I haven’t seen her for a couple of months because I haven’t been home,” she said earlier this week. But authorities have warned there is no place for complacency and businesses of all types must use log-

Buzzfeed closes news operations in Britain, Australia

SYDNEY: Groundbreaking website BuzzFeed said yesterday that it would be shuttering part of its loss-making news operations in Britain and Australia, as

it scales back global ambitions to cut costs. “For economic and strategic reasons, we are going to focus on news that hits big in the United States during this difficult period,” a company spokesperson said. Many news outlets have been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, with plummeting advertising revenues and already struggling operations pushed deeper into the red.

Ten staff in Britain and four in Australia will be furloughed, in a move that is expected to become permanent. The company will no longer cover local news in the two countries, but said: “In the UK, we still plan

on retaining some employees who are focused on news with a global audience — social news, celebrity, and investigations.”

The four Australian posts were “no longer essential during this time of sharply limited resources,” the company added. Once maligned as a funnel for little more than celebrity gossip, clickbait lists and cat pictures, BuzzFeed has developed into a news force to rival more established outlets.

“BuzzFeed gave us space to experiment with covering politics for a young audience,” Australian news editor Lane Sainty tweeted. She lauded her staff’s

work to “tackle important and often under-covered beats like abortion, LGBTQ rights, Indigenous affairs, immigration and internet culture.”

“I’ve always been grateful for that & very proud of our work.” More cost-cutting measures are expected, including in the United States, where “work-share programs” are being touted as a way of avoiding furloughs. “Those options need to meet our savings goals, be legally and logistically workable, and allow us to keep producing kinetic, powerful journalism,” BuzzFeed said. This year “news will spend about \$10 million more than it takes in,” it added. — AFP

“If they’re working from home then all of a sudden we’re not getting full... we’re not out of the woods yet.” — AFP



WELLINGTON: Women sit on the waterfront in Wellington on May 14, 2020. New Zealand will phase out its coronavirus lockdown over the next 10 days after successfully containing the virus, although some restrictions will remain, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced. —AFP

books to record customer details in case there is an outbreak.

There are also stringent protocols surrounding the use of personal protective equipment and sanitisers that are likely to remain in force long-term. “It’s not difficult, it’s more a matter of not forgetting that I have to do it after every client,” Wellington barber Dali Toma said, wiping down his chair.

Restaurateur Stephen Morris said the way his Mediterranean eatery Avida operated had fundamentally changed. Capacity has

International

Japan expected to lift emergency in most areas except Tokyo

Emergency gives governors more authority to tell people to stay home

TOKYO: Japan is expected to lift a state of emergency across a large part of the country yesterday but the capital Tokyo will likely remain under restrictions until there is a convincing containment of the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is scheduled to hold a news conference at 6 p.m. (0900 GMT) when he is expected to announce the lifting of the emergency in 39 of Japan's 47 prefectures, but not in Tokyo.

The world's third-largest economy declared a nationwide state of emergency a month ago, urging citizens to reduce person-to-person contact by 80% in an effort to slow the pace of new coronavirus infections and ease the strain on medical services.

The government had said it would reassess the situation in mid-May. Abe, like leaders everywhere, is striving to strike a balance between damage to the economy from prolonged shutdowns and the need to contain the virus.

Economists said normalisation would be gradual as the government keeps a wary eye on the possibility of a second wave of infections as seen in countries such as South Korea and China.

"The focus is whether the government will lift the emergency in the big areas such as Tokyo and Osaka before the end of May, as was initially planned," said Atsushi Takeda, chief economist at Itochu Research Institute.

"If it does, economic recovery will likely be faster than previously estimated." The emergency gives governors more authority to tell people to stay at home and to close schools and businesses, but there is no penalty for non-compliance. Some non-essential businesses, even in areas hit hard by the coronavirus, have started to reopen ahead of the government's review, and the scope of restrictions has varied across the country.

The emergency is also expected to remain in force in Osaka, Japan's second-largest metropolis, but its governor has announced criteria for gradually lifting some restraints on businesses including eateries and bars. The 39 prefectures in which the emergency is expected to be lifted account for 54% of Japan's population.

Waiting

The greater Tokyo area, where the emergency is expected to remain in force, represents



TOKYO: Women wearing face masks are seen on a street in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

about a third of the economy. "Tokyo is the heart of the Japanese economy. It's like driving a car with three wheels," said Jesper Koll, chief executive of asset manager WisdomTree Japan.

The government is set to add four economists to its advisory panel for combating the epidemic and another review will be conducted again in about a week. — Reuters

Typhoon forces evacuations in virus-hit Philippines

TOKYO: A powerful typhoon hit the central Philippines yesterday, forcing a complicated and risky evacuation for tens of thousands already hunkered down at home during the coronavirus pandemic.

At least 200,000 people live in coastal areas or flimsy homes in the province near where the storm, called Typhoon Vongfong, made landfall with fierce winds and heavy rain.

Tens of millions more live along the typhoon's path, which is expected to take it near the densely populated capital Manila.

Because of the twin threat of the storm and the virus, evacuation centres in the central Philippines will only accept half their capacity and evacuees will have to wear facemasks.

The surge of people and limited space mean authorities have asked 47 big churches in the area to accept people fleeing the typhoon, which is the first of the season.

"We will be overwhelmed so we're expanding our evacuation to include churches," said Cedric Daep, disaster chief in central Albay province.

Vongfong is packing gusts up to 190 kilometres (120 miles) an hour as well as drenching rains that could cause flooding and landslides, the national weather agency said.

Areas in the typhoon's path are under varying levels of virus quarantine, yet many people are staying at home to avoid infection. — AFP

Manila cruise flotilla offers crew confinement in comfort

MANILA: In the past few weeks, Manila Bay in the Philippines has been transformed into the world's biggest parking lot for cruise ships, none of which have any guests.

More than 20 vessels with a combined volume of about 2 million tonnes are clustered off the coast of the capital, awaiting coronavirus clearance for more than 5,300 Philippine staff to return home from abandoned cruises, with no guarantee of a job at sea again. More ships are set to join the flotilla, says the coast guard, which has been shuttling between ships to administer 4,991 virus tests for crew quarantined for the 14 days mandatory for repatriates. No suspected cases have been reported.

Crew told Reuters they were bored, lonely or frustrated being so close to home, but felt fortunate to be confined to their cabins in comfort, knowing that thousands of Philippine returnees are in tougher quarantine conditions elsewhere.

"Each person is staying in a suite room - We feel like the guests now," joked Michael Torralba Martinez, speaking from one of the cabins that he normally cleans.

"We feel safer here ... Standards are strict in ships when it comes to cleanliness and sanitation," he said in an online chat. Martinez, 33, and the father of two, gave Reuters a virtual tour of his room, one of 1,011 on the 15-deck Sun Princess, where 225 quarantined Philippine staff were being served by colleagues from countries such as China, India and Indonesia.

He displayed photographs of room-service meals, his double bed, balcony and flatscreen television, plus daily puzzles and activities like origami and bingo, to keep entertained in rooms guarded by security staff.

"If someone is caught leaving the room, quarantine is back to

day zero for everyone. So no one dares," he added. At least 15 ships in the Manila flotilla are owned by subsidiaries of cruise giant Carnival Corp, including Costa Cruises, Cunard, P&O Cruises Australia and Princess Cruises, of which three ships were hotbeds for infections. Those firms did not immediately respond to questions from Reuters. The return is bittersweet for some, a chance to be home again with less risk of prolonged exposure to an outbreak, but soon jobless and facing dim employment prospects in an industry brought to a virtual standstill by outbreaks, travel bans and flight cuts.

'Happy and sad'

"When I learned we'll be sent back home, I was happy and sad at the same time. Sad because I'll lose my job, but happy because I can be with my family," said Jenison Herrera of the housekeeping staff of the Queen Elizabeth. The ship has been quarantined since April 20 and without passengers since March 14, a month into Herrera's nine-month contract, when owners in Australia decided to halt services and sail home the 530 Philippine crew. "Those who are not in quarantine are the ones who give our needs. We call them 'frontliners'," Herrera 33, said of colleagues. "Even the highest positions in the ship."

It is too soon to gauge the impact of the virus on the estimated 500,000 Philippine seafarers, who sent home \$6.5 billion in 2019, a fifth of the country's remittance income, the central bank says.

Ace Rodrin Catibayan, 34, a waiter on the Costa Venezia, is awaiting the outcome of on-board tests. Although he is certain those are negative, he is worried about his income and possible stigma at home from the attention focused on cruise outbreaks.

"For sure it would take time before we can go onboard again. It would be a long wait for us to make a living," he said. "I'll try to apply again or start a small business. But I really want to go back on the ship because I earn higher here."

Jose Albar Kato, who heads the Philippines' International Maritime Association and its federation for seafarers' employers, was not surprised to see the giant huddle off Manila of cruise ships, each the length of two to three soccer fields. — Reuters

Lifestyle

Friday Times

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www.kuwaittimes.net



A Bali police officer wears a scary mask called "Leak" while trying to educate people on COVID-19 coronavirus matter at a traditional market in Kerobokan, near Denpasar yesterday.—AFP

Going solo: Star Wars fans help to maintain distancing in Manila

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In pandemic times, all the gaming world's a (concert) stage



In this file photo, 15-year-old Yasmin, the photographer's daughter, plays Fortnite featuring Travis Scott Presents: Astronomical on April 23, 2020 in Los Angeles. —AFP photos



In this file photo, a view of Fortnite featuring Travis Scott Presents: Astronomical.



In this file photo Rapper Travis Scott performs during the half-time show of Super Bowl LIII between the New England Patriots and the Los Angeles Rams at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, Georgia.

With concerts on hold to halt coronavirus spread, the gaming world is increasingly catering to music lovers, with artists becoming animated performers in virtual realms to the trippy delight of millions. The trend has gained momentum in recent weeks after the ultra-popular Fortnite morphed rapper Travis Scott into a massive psychedelic spaceman performing in a celestial dreamscape, as a record-setting 12.3 million concurrent players entered his 10-minute set inside the game. According to the platform that's spurred an international gaming craze since launching in 2017, over 27.7 million unique players participated in the Scott show across its premiere and four encore presentations.

And in early May Fortnite launched an enormous virtual party featuring DJs including deadmau5 and Steve Aoki, celebrating its milestone of 350 million registered players. The pandemic didn't prompt transforming artists into an avatars — DJ Marshmello had a massive Fortnite concert in 2019 — but that much of the globe's population has been urged or forced to stay home over COVID-19 has certainly spotlighted it. Acknowledging the unfortunate circumstances coronavirus has wrought more broadly, Adam Arrigo — the CEO of Wave, an entertainment technology company that has put on concerts from DJ Jean-Michel Jarre and now is teaming with artists including R&B singer John Legend — said virtual show business “has exploded” due to quarantine measures. “It's kind of given us a chance to show people really what the value, both creatively and economically, of virtual concerts is,” said Arrigo, who co-founded Wave in 2016.

'Visual spectacle'

Virtual concerts in Fortnite or on other gaming platforms, as well as streaming outlets like YouTube live or Twitch, are a different, much more elaborate animal than the concerts many stars have launched recently on Instagram or Facebook live apps. A musician himself, Arrigo told AFP the virtual experience intends to take viewers “where I can be any avatar I want, or the performer can take me on a journey — just like I feel when I go to a physical show.” But he said Wave doesn't aim to replicate an in-person concert, instead working to leverage tech to “create a new experience” heavy on “visual spectacle” and virtual interaction. “You're not beholden to the laws of physics or gravity, so you can just do anything,” the 36-year-old said.

These types of shows see performers transformed into an avatar that uses computer vision and motion capture technology to mimic the artist's live movements in real-time — “when they smile, their avatar smiles,” explained Arrigo. It also offers artists a way to reach fans who might avoid concerts even in non-pandemic times for a variety of reasons, including ticket cost, travel time or introversion, he said.

Pandemic rush

Dmitri Williams, a communications and technology scholar at the University of Southern California, said beyond improving accessibility, virtual concerts offer a win-win situation for both artists and gaming platforms. Artists can draw in potential fans who might not normally flock to a show, and game publishers “get to associate with some-

thing fun and credible,” he said. And the pandemic is an ideal moment to market: Most game developers “are treating this period the way that they would look at traditionally fruitful market periods,” Williams said, giving the Christmas shopping rush as an example.

The music industry has played “unprecedented times” on repeat over the past two decades, from struggling to overhaul business models as streaming took over to the current pandemic that has artists and their crews, who rely on touring to survive, trapped at home. Arrigo holds that virtual concerts can offer a way forward to bolster the industry, a “compliment” to live performances, once they return, for fans to enjoy and artists to earn income from.

For now, income streams include ways to make the virtual concert experience “VIP” — buying virtual goods for your avatar, or sending a performer onstage flowers in the hopes they'll interact with you. Ticketed streams at different price points are also an option to up revenue, said Arrigo.

'Physical connection'

But could a virtual show, even one rife with mind-blowing effects and online social interaction at a lower price point, ever replace a flesh-and-blood performance? Probably not, says Arrigo — adding that was never the goal anyway. “There are things that happen in a live concert that you can just never experience in a virtual one,” he said. “The feeling of, like, physical connection with another human being.” Virtual reality, he predicts, “is always going to be something that exists alongside actual life.” —AFP

100-year-old Russian beats coronavirus

Russia celebrated a rare bit of good news on Wednesday as a 100-year-old woman left a Moscow hospital after fully recovering from the coronavirus. In the country's first reported case of a survivor that old, the woman, Pelageya Poyarkova, was discharged on her 100th birthday, the Moscow clinic treating her said. Russian television showed the elderly woman wearing a face mask and clutching a bouquet of red roses as she exited in a wheelchair, surrounded by doctors and journalists. Poyarkova had contracted the virus from a fellow patient at another hospital where she had been receiving routine treatment.

After testing positive and developing several symptoms she was transferred to the Moscow Brain Centre, which normally specializes in stroke victims but has been repurposed

to treat coronavirus patients. The hospital said Poyarkova was the first Russian centenarian to have fully recovered from the virus. “She turned out to be a tough old lady,” the hospital's acting director Vsevolod Belousov said on Russian television. She did not require intensive care and had standard treatment with blood-thinning drugs, he said. Born in Moscow, the elderly woman now lives with her daughter and son-in-law. Her husband was killed in World War II, leaving her to care for her young child alone, the hospital said. Russia has now reported 242,271 cases of coronavirus and is the world's second worst-affected country after the United States in terms of number of infections. The coronavirus is especially dangerous for older people and those with chronic conditions. —AFP



Pelageya Poyarkova, 100, wearing a protective mask poses for a picture as she leaves the Brain Centre in Moscow on May 13, 2020. —AFP

Lifestyle | Music & Movies

Hollywood Bowl cancels summer concerts due to virus

The Hollywood Bowl scrapped its entire summer concert season Wednesday due to the coronavirus crisis, in a “devastating” move that leaves the Los Angeles Philharmonic with an \$80 million shortfall. The famous open-air California venue has hosted acts from the Beatles to Yo-Yo Ma over nearly a century, and its concerts from June through September are a staple of Los Angeles cultural life. “We are all broken-hearted by the effects of this crisis and share the disappointment of all those who look forward to the Bowl” concerts, said Los Angeles Philharmonic Association CEO Chad Smith in a statement.

It marks the first summer without concerts since the venue, known for its distinctive shell-shaped stage nestled in the Hollywood Hills, opened in 1922. Andrea Bocelli, Bob Dylan and Diana Ross were among the artists scheduled to perform this summer. The venue also hosts film screenings and sing-alongs. The move confirms a precarious financial situation for the LA Philharmonic, which co-manages the Bowl and schedules its summer season. The company had

already scrapped spring concerts at the downtown Walt Disney Concert Hall and drawn on its endowment.

On Wednesday, it announced further cost-cutting measures for the summer. A quarter of non-union employees and the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra will be furloughed, on top of previous salary reductions and part-time layoffs. “We are doing what is necessary to ensure that we are all here for the next century,” added Smith. California has registered nearly 70,000 cases of coronavirus so far with more than 2,800 deaths. Los Angeles County alone accounts for nearly half the cases and more than half the deaths.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti has warned that large gatherings including concerts and sporting events may not resume this year. “This decision makes me heartsick for all the County residents who have made the Bowl and the Ford a treasured ritual of each summer, although this is the best decision to make in the face of the threat from the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Los Angeles County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl.—AFP



In this file photo taken on October 15, 2011, Juanes (center) performs at the Clinton Foundation's “Decade of Difference” concert at the Hollywood Bowl in Hollywood, California. —AFP

Johnny Depp ‘non-violent’, says ex Paradis in UK libel case

Actor Johnny Depp has been described as “kind” and “non-violent” by his ex-partner Vanessa Paradis in British court documents that emerged on Wednesday in his libel case brought against The Sun newspaper. The Hollywood star is suing News Group Newspapers, which publishes the tabloid, and its executive editor Dan Wootton over allegations — strenuously denied — that he abused his ex-wife Amber Heard. In an April 2018 article the paper referred to the “Pirates of the Caribbean” star as a “wife-beater”. Two weeks of hearings in the case were due to start in London’s High Court in March but were suspended due to the coronavirus outbreak after two of Depp’s legal representatives had to self-isolate.

It is now set to be tried at the High Court in London in July. Depp’s lawyers want to admit evidence from French singer and actress Paradis, his former long-time partner with whom he has two children. The couple’s 14-year relationship ended in 2012. Depp married Heard three years later, while Paradis went on to wed French director Samuel Benchetrit in 2018. In a witness statement, Paradis said she had known the actor for more than 25 years and they had raised their two children together.

“Through all these years I’ve known Johnny to be a kind, attentive, generous, and non-violent person and father,” she stated. “He was never violent or abusive to me.” At a court hearing conducted remotely over Skype on Wednesday, Depp’s lawyers also said they want to admit evidence from actress Winona Ryder, who was in a relationship with the star in the 1990s. In her statement, Ryder said she could not “wrap my head around” the accusations by Heard that Depp was abusive. “He was never, never violent towards me,” Ryder said. “He was never, never abusive at all towards me.” Depp and Heard settled a divorce out of court in 2017, after Heard had obtained a restraining order against him the previous year. He denies being abusive towards her and has brought separate libel proceedings against Heard in the United States.—AFP



Johnny Depp and Vanessa Paradis

Rose McGowan: Fame prepared me for quarantine

Rose McGowan says fame has prepared her for quarantine “her whole life”. The ‘Charmed’ actress rose to fame starring in the WB Television Network series and she has admitted her worldwide success is very similar to the current quarantine recommendations amidst the coronavirus pandemic as she has been hiring people to keep others away from me. Speaking on Channel Q’s Let’s Go There, she said: “I prepared for quarantine my whole life for a long time because I was in this weird position where I had to hire people to keep people away from me. I couldn’t leave my house ... TV fame, you’re in people’s living rooms and they make relationships with you and when you see them, their eyes would, like, dilate.”



Meanwhile, Rose previously admitted she quit acting because it became “so boring” being in front of the camera. In an Instagram post shared in 2015, she wrote: “Thoughts on the current state of tent pole films aka superheroes. I’d like to petition for other stories to be added to the slate. Where are the human stories? I don’t want green goblins and tight outfits. I want intelligence, daring, work that drives society forward. I want a mirror, not every cliché regurgitated ad nauseum. From Scarface, to Lebowsky, to M, to Anchor Man, to the sublime Carol, to Chinatown, to Sullivan’s Travels-. Let’s bring complexity back. Let’s be the badassess we used to be. Open up the director’s chair and it’ll change. #hollywood #directing think of all the stories not on screen because women are blocked by the status quo. Honestly, it got so boring in front of the camera I had to quit. Boring often times egomaniacal tyrants not making art. Hmm.. Why ever should that change? Add women. Change the conversation. Promote depth. (sic).”—Bang Showbiz

Mara the ex-circus elephant retires to Brazil



Photo shows elephant Mara after arriving from the road journey from Buenos Aires Zoo to the Elephant Sanctuary Brazil.



Handout picture released by the Brazilian Elephant Sanctuary showing elephant Mara after arriving from the road journey from Buenos Aires Zoo to the Elephant Sanctuary Brazil at the Chapada dos Guimaraes, Mato Grosso state, Brazil.—AFP photos



Photo shows elephant Mara after arriving from the road journey from Buenos Aires Zoo to the Elephant Sanctuary Brazil.



A keeper reassures the elephant Mara.



A keeper reassures the elephant Mara.



A keeper reassures the elephant Mara.

Mara, an Indian elephant rescued from an Argentine circus, arrived at an animal sanctuary in Brazil Wednesday to start a new life at 50-something — beginning with a celebratory frolic in the dirt. Mara, who weighs around 5,500 kilograms (more than 12,000 pounds), spent much of her life as a circus attraction, then was brought to the Buenos Aires Zoo in 1995.

The city closed the zoo in 2016 over complaints about animal cruelty and turned it into an “eco park.” Officials decided to send Mara off to a roomier retirement at an elephant sanctuary in the state of Mato Grosso, in west-central Brazil. Mara, who is believed to be in her early 50s, was transported in a huge crate built for the occasion and loaded onto and off of a truck with the help of a crane. The logistics of the four-day, 2,000-kilometer (1,250-mile) trip were all the more complicated because of the coronavirus pandemic. “We are grateful to everyone who has helped to make this happen — especially the EcoParque Buenos Aires, our supporters and the officials in both Brazil and Argentina who have made an international elephant transport possible during this pandemic,” Elephant Sanctuary Brazil said on its Facebook page, where it live-streamed Mara’s arrival.

“Mara will have a large habitat with trees, grass, ponds, creeks, mud wallows, specialized care staff and elephant friends.” The trip was overseen by two teams of specialists, who followed customized protocols to protect both themselves and Mara from the new coronavirus. Upon arrival, Mara timidly stuck her nose out of her container, then cautiously stepped out into the tropical sun. Soon, she was lounging about in a pile of red dirt in her enclosure, where she will adapt to her new surroundings before being released into the 1,133-hectare (2,800-acre) sanctuary.—AFP



A crane lifts a fitted cage carrying the elephant Mara.



Mara begins a journey of more than 2700 km to an elephant sanctuary in Brazil in a fitted cage.



Mara is pictured before a journey of more than 2700 km to an elephant sanctuary in Brazil.

Canada zoo to send pandas home after bamboo shortage

A Canadian zoo is shipping two pandas home to China after the coronavirus pandemic left it struggling to source the massive bamboo stockpiles needed to feed the giant creatures. Er Shun and her mate Da Mao have lived in the country since 2013 as part of a 10-year loan agreement with a breeding facility in Chengdu. The arrival of the cute and furry animals was a huge spectacle that was broadcast live on all major Canadian television networks. Er Shun later mothered two twin cubs — the first pandas born on Canadian soil.

But Calgary Zoo said it was cutting short the pair's stay because the COVID-19 outbreak had disrupted transport links and made it harder to supply the 40 kilograms (90 pounds) of bamboo a typical adult panda eats each day. Staff had worked to find alternative bamboo providers but there were concerns that supplies could be disrupted without warning and leave the animals hungry, the zoo said in a statement. "Knowing a second wave of COVID-19 is likely... the Calgary Zoo feels it's critical to move the beloved giant pandas back to China where there are abundant local sources of bamboo," the statement said. The zoo is currently closed due to the pandemic and said it would not be able to allow the public to bid farewell to the animals. Er Shun and Da Mao's cubs have already been relocated to China, according to national broadcaster CBC. —AFP



Sea lion 'Leo' draws an Amabie mascot, that is associated with viruses and it became popular after the pandemic in Japan, at the Hakkeijima Sea Paradise aquarium in Yokohama, suburban Tokyo yesterday.—AFP photos

Lifestyle | Features



Local youth representatives dressed as Stormtroopers and Darth Vader (left -in black) from the Star Wars film franchise patrol in a wooden boat around a submerged village to remind residents to stay at home during the enhanced community quarantine in suburban Manila.—AFP photos



Local youth representatives dressed as Stormtroopers and Darth Vader from the Star Wars film franchise walk through their village to remind residents to stay at home.



Local youth representatives dressed Stormtroopers and Darth Vader (left -in black).

Going solo: Star Wars fans help to maintain distancing in Manila

A Philippines suburb is getting help from a galaxy far, far away to enforce its virus lockdown — Darth Vader and a retinue of stormtroopers, whose patrols are drawing smiles from locals weary of weeks of quarantine. Three times a week, members of a local youth group don their homemade Star Wars outfits to do their rounds of Panghulo in the capital Manila to remind people to stay in their homes to help halt the contagion's spread.

On one patrol, AFP saw Darth Vader striding into a silent courtyard followed by the white-armored stormtroopers holding blaster rifles and scanning for anyone breaking the lockdown order that has confined the city's 12 million people to their homes since mid-March. Another mission saw them being rowed through the flooded streets on the lookout for those sneaking outside, dodging the electricity lines that sagged overhead. "We made the costumes... to ease the stress and worries of children and their families," said Alexandria Ignacio, one of the group's members. The locals are happy to see something new in the deserted streets — even if it is the Empire's feared stormtroopers. "We want them to continue," said local Loida Lumagas. "We also need a little amusement."—AFP



Local youth representatives dressed Stormtroopers and Darth Vader (left -in black).

US 'cleaner' tries to duck into Germany to see lover

A lovesick 20-year-old American man tried dressing up as a cleaner to cheat coronavirus border controls in Germany so he could see his girlfriend, police said Tuesday. After arriving at Frankfurt airport from Washington on Sunday, the young US national donned a high-visibility vest and picked up two bags of rubbish. "He then tried to convince security staff that he was a cleaner and was supposed to empty the bins behind the

security area," federal police said in a statement. However, his plan was foiled when a member of staff noticed he was not wearing a security pass and couldn't speak German.

He confessed at a police station that he was desperate to see his girlfriend and couldn't think of another way of entering the country. Even if he had managed to reach the bins, the man would still have been in the airport's transit area, police said — meaning

he would still have faced more border controls. After being questioned, the young romantic was sent back to Washington on Monday. Germany has imposed tough border controls to try to stop the spread of COVID-19, which has infected more than 170,000 people in the country.—AFP

Incredible Ocean pools around the world



Do as the Victorians did and “take the waters” at Tunnels Beaches, Devon.— Shutterstock

By Emily Matchar, Lonely Planet Writer

Sometimes we crave the sensation of plunging into the ocean, waves breaking over our heads, the deeps beneath our feet. But other times we want a more “contained” seaside swim – the same elemental experience, but with the luxury of being able to touch the bottom (and maybe even grab a hot shower after). This is where ocean pools come in. Whether natural rock grottoes or man-made from concrete and tile, these oceanside pools give you the best of both worlds: safe, serene waters with boundless sea-and-sky views. If you’re looking for an alternative seaside experience, or maybe a stepping stone to transition from traditional swimming pools to the ‘big blue’, these aquatic oases could be right for you.



Grotto della Poesia, Salento, Italy

Meaning “cave of poetry,” this 100ft-wide natural sinkhole is certainly worthy of verse. Leap from the limestone cliffs into the cool cyan water, and then swim under the archway into the Adriatic Sea. Arrive early in summer to avoid the crowds; the rest of the year it’ll be just you and the seabirds (and a few cold-resistant Russian tourists). There are several archaeological sites nearby, including Grotto della Poesia Piccola (“little cave of poetry”), its walls covered in ancient inscriptions. You’ll find the grotto on the east side of the Salento Peninsula (aka “the boot”).



The Piscinas das Marés are the work of Álvaro Siza Vieira, Portugal's most revered contemporary architect. —Getty Images

Queen's Baths, Eleuthera, Bahamas

Climber up the rocky hillside on this laid-back Bahamian island to find the series of shallow, sun-warmed pools known locally as the "Queen's Baths" or (the slightly less fancy) "hot tubs." Visit at low or medium tide to spend an hour or two soaking, splashing and looking for shells as the navy-blue Atlantic churns below. Just a half-mile away is the famous Glass Window Bridge, where the island be-

comes so skinny you can stand on the cliff and see the startling contrast between the choppy Atlantic to your right and the peaceful aquamarine Caribbean to your left.

Tunnels Beaches, Devon, UK

Tiptoe through a series of dim cliff tunnels, hand-hewn by Welsh miners in the early 1800s, to reach these hidden beaches. At the "ladies beach" (though coed now for

more than 100 years), a tidal pool appears for three hours before and after low tide. The pool's retaining wall was man-made by the same miners using boulders and lime mortar. In the height of the Victorian era, ladies "took the waters" here in private horse-drawn wooden bathing machines that were rolled into the ocean to protect their modesty. Before that, the deeply furrowed sea cliffs were once used by smugglers and fugitives. Don't expect any sugar-white sands; these beaches are pure English pebble – slippery, chilly and delightful.

To Sua Ocean Trench, 'Upolu Island, Samoa

From above, this gemstone-green swimming hole looks like a giant's eye blinking up from the lava landscape of Samoa's 'Upolu Island. The 30-metre-deep pool is accessible by a tall and slightly terrifying wooden ladder, though the brave (or foolhardy) simply jump. The water here is so clear you can see fish flitting far below. The trench is fed by an underwater lava tunnel that leads out to the South Pacific – skilled divers can swim through it, but all levels of swimmer should be aware of the undertow. The edge of the hole drips with jungle foliage, which opens into manicured seaside gardens with picnic areas and a small swimming beach beyond.

Bondi Icebergs Pool, Sydney, Australia

Built into the cliffs just above the crashing Tasman Sea, the Bondi Baths at the edge of Sydney's most famous beach have been iconic for more than a century. Anyone is welcome to take a dip in the lap pool or the adjacent kiddie pool, but to become a member of the Bondi Icebergs winter swimming club you'll have to commit to swimming three Sundays out of four during the chilly months – for five years! Because the pools are concrete, the water here is actually colder than the sea, and in rougher weather you might get pummelled by a rogue wave. Nothing like a soothing dip, eh!?

An aerial view of the inlets off Brazil's Porto de Galinhas beach.— Getty Images





Two oceanic worlds collide at the Glass Window Bridge, Eleuthera. —Shutterstock



The To Sua Ocean Trench is an Avatar-esque fantasy-scape, except it's real!— Getty Images

Piscinas das Marés
near Porto, Portugal

Fancy submerging yourself in a national monument? And we don't mean figuratively. Plunge into the two saltwater swimming pools of Piscina das Marés, sunk into the rock of Leça da Palmeira beach, Matosinhos, a fishing village north of Porto, in the 1960s at the behest of renowned Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza Vieira. The maestro wasn't finished there, though: after a dip to work up an appetite, follow the coastline north to his Boa Nova Tea House, an alluring Michelin-starred restaurant with wraparound views of the tumbling Atlantic.

Porto de Galinhas
near Recife, Brazil

In a country with an embarrassment of riches when it comes to beaches, Porto de Galinhas, south of pulsating Recife, still manages to stand out thanks to a scattering of turquoise and aquamarine inlets a short boat ride from its fine, white sand. Fisherfolk ferry visitors to these Instagram-worthy natural pools, formed between the beach and the sheltering reef, in distinctive triangular-sailed jangadas (small sailing vessels) for R\$25 per person. For something more vigorous, head south for windsurfing and kitesurfing off the reliably blustery Pontal de Maracaípe.

Sea Point Pavilion
Cape Town, South Africa

Facing the chilly Atlantic at the edge of suburban Cape Town, Sea Point Pavilion is a splashy, noisy, summer-long swim party. It's got a lap pool, a diving pool and two kiddie pools – all saltwater, with some refreshingly fed directly from the adjacent ocean. When you're ready to dry off, spread out on the lawn with a picnic and a cold soda from one of the park vendors, and watch the clouds floating above the peak of Lion's Head. It's hard to imagine a more scenic public pool in either hemisphere; not to mention – no sharks! —lonelyplanet.com



An aerial view of Bondi Icebergs Pool. — Shutterstock



Sydney's famous Bondi Icebergs Pool regularly stars on Instagram. — Getty Images



Enough pools to keep the whole family happy plus a sea view. —Shutterstock

Kids Page

Daily SuDoku

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

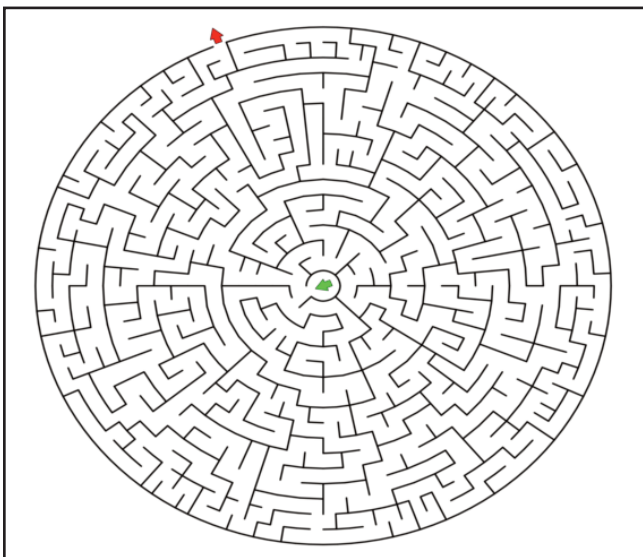
easy

Yesterday's Solution

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

very hard

Kids Mazes



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Coloring

Join the dots



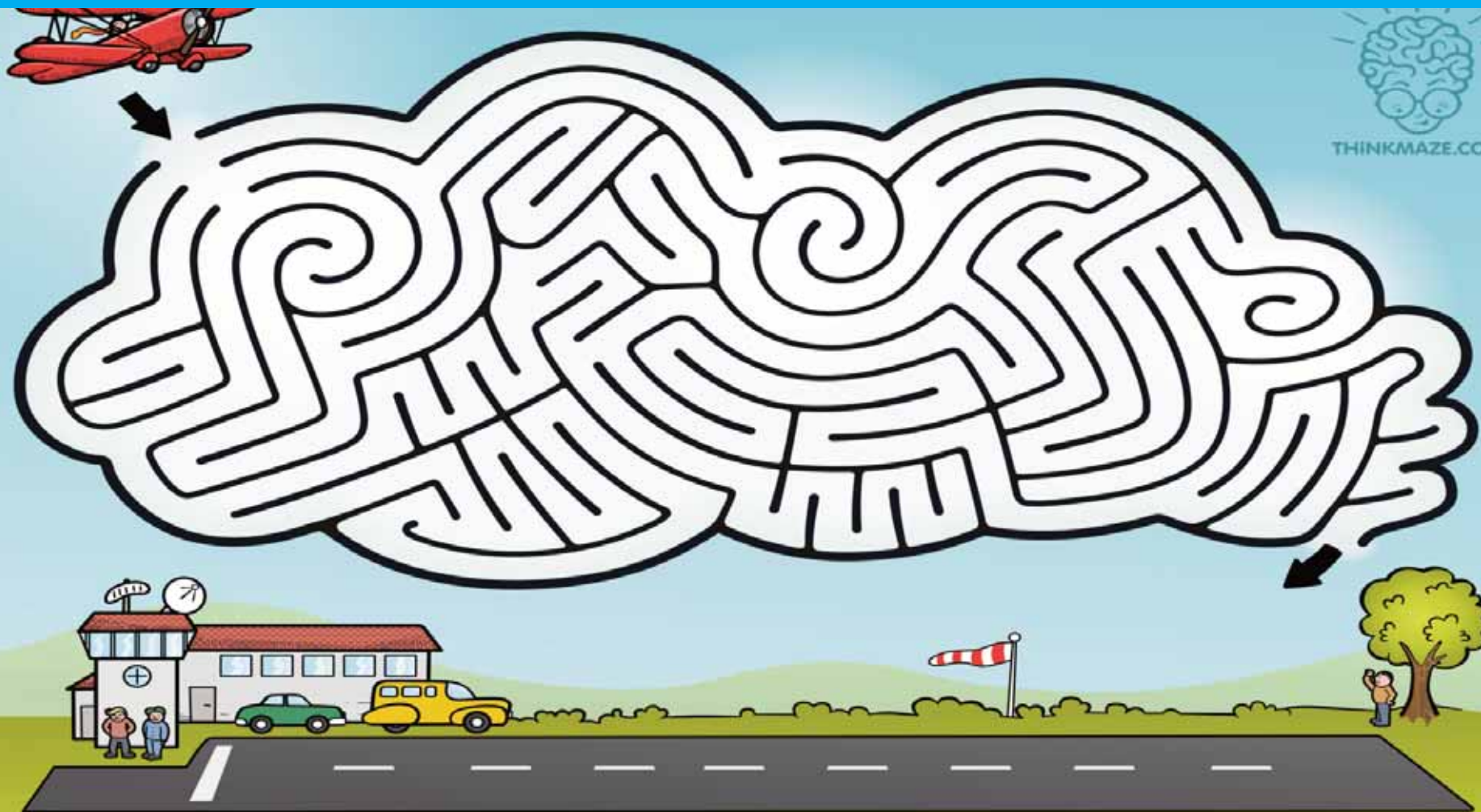
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Kuwait Times

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Friday, May 15, 2020

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- 6- Non-invasive diagnostic procedures echocardiography, exercise stress test, and 24 hour blood pressure and Holter monitoring

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 ENT Consultant, Laryngologist

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- ◆ Laryngology Fellowship, McGill University- Canada.
- ◆ Fellow of the European Board of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck surgery.
- ◆ Member of the American Academy of Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery.
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- Abdominal wall and hernia surgeries.
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- Anal surgeries.

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Stars

STAR TRACK

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

Your great period of meditation that started a few weeks ago is now finished, Aries. This means that it's time to get back into the real world again! Now you have to test out how the "new and improved" you are going to operate in everyday life. Get ready. You can expect some real changes!

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

If you have grievances to voice about your love life, Taurus, this is the day to speak up. Indeed, anything less than total honesty won't be tolerated today. You can expect to confront the "other," whether mate, friend, or family member, on the basis of truth and righteousness. Know that you'll command their attention! But be careful that the weight of your words doesn't surpass the intention behind your thoughts.

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

Are you thinking of switching careers, Gemini, or traveling to the other side of the world? With everything on lockdown right now, it might also be tempting to just want to pull a "Greta Garbo" and stay home with the shades drawn tight. A recent series of small work-related incidents is likely to inspire the most outlandish ideas. If you feel the need for a change of scene, don't do anything too rash.

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

You're likely to find people irritating today, Cancer. It's as though nothing is good enough and nobody seems to know exactly what he or she wants. You'll reign supreme within this conflict and dissatisfaction. You may even be asked to step in and restore order, which is easy enough to do when everyone is working remotely. If the conflict is on the domestic front, tread carefully when asked to take on the role of sheriff!

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

You may have felt an oppressive mood hanging in the air when you woke up this morning, Leo. Unfortunately, that haze of misunderstanding and conflict is likely to last all day. However, it makes today an ideal time to speak up about anything that's bothering you! Don't be shy about going on the warpath if that's what it takes. Otherwise, you're likely to be the target of a surprise attack.

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

Your mood today is the stuff of which memorable encounters are made, Virgo. You'll be wary at first, perhaps even a bit hostile to anyone who dares to intrude on your freedom. Then you'll realize that this person is special, intriguing, and definitely out of the ordinary. Finally, you'll see that the qualities they offer just happen to be what you need most right now. Social distancing can't be over soon enough for you!

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

More than ever before, you'll feel as though it's time to take matters into your own hands and build your future, Libra. You're fed up with living on hope and putting your happiness off until tomorrow. Your determination will be so strong that you may even surprise yourself. You'll refine your approach and make it more concrete in the coming days. Today is the first day of a new life for you. Just be safe and stay healthy!

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

Scorpio, this is an ideal moment to address the questions that have been on your mind for the last few weeks. Focus on any uncertainties about your emotional life. If you're currently involved in unsatisfactory relationships, don't be afraid to leave them behind. If you're fretting about an unanswered request, let it go. No response is forthcoming. People have a lot on their minds these days, so it may not even be personal.

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

If you lack of confidence in yourself, Sagittarius, those uncertainties are coming to an end. You've been hesitant to stand in the spotlight for quite a while now, perhaps feeling that you weren't quite ready. Well, no more excuses! Ready or not, you're going to have to push forward! Life is short, and the times are far from normal. The only thing you risk losing is your pride, and believe it or not, pride is your most resilient asset.

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

It's possible that the last few weeks have brought clarity around certain questions about your vocation, Capricorn. You may even have a better sense of what you think your destiny is. Now that you've reached this point, it's time to stop thinking about such things, and let life take over. You're well armed for this! To some extent, you can even manage circumstances to work for your benefit.

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

These last few weeks have been good for your equilibrium, Aquarius. It was a question of becoming more involved in life than usual and showing what you're capable of. Most likely you had a mixture of successes and setbacks, but on the whole, improvements have been steady. You may have noticed things about yourself that need improvement, but isn't that true for everyone?

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

Questioning oneself is never very agreeable, Pisces, but this is the main objective of today's celestial aspect. You'll soon be launched into new adventures, and it's best to be ready. Take advantage of the energy generated by this planetary configuration to look within and find the source of some of your failings. This isn't an easy exercise, to be sure, but it will do you a world of good. Just be honest with yourself.

Country Codes

Afghanistan	0093	Iran	0098
Albania	00355	Iraq	00964
Algeria	00213	Ireland	00353
Andorra	00376	Italy	0039
Angola	00244	Ivory Coast	00225
Anguilla	001264	Jamaica	001876
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Argentina	0054	Jordan	00962
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Belarus	00375	Lebanon	00961
Belgium	0032	Liberia	00231
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Benin	00229	Lithuania	00370
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Bolivia	00591	Macedonia	00389
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Cyprus (Northern)	0090392	Netherlands Antilles	00599
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Dominican Republic	001809	Niue	00683
Ecuador	00593	Norfolk Island	00672
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El Salvador	00503	North Korea	00850
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Business

FRIDAY, MAY 15, 2020

34 Australians warned worse yet to come after job losses



36 Collapse in consumption dragging down global economic outlook: IMF



36 Europe nears crisis plan for public stakes in key firms



OCEANSIDE, New York: Construction workers perform their jobs in front of Mount Sinai South Nassau Hospital in Oceanside, New York. —AFP

COVID-19 batters US labor market

US weekly jobless benefits soar, layoff surge

WASHINGTON: The global novel coronavirus crisis continues to batter the US labor market, with millions more Americans, including white collar workers, expected to have filed for unemployment benefits last week as the hit from the pandemic spills over into a broader swath of the economy.

Yesterday's weekly jobless claims report from the Labor Department, the most-timely data on the economy's health, would cement economists' expectations for a third straight month of massive job losses in May. The report would come a day after Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell warned of an "extended period" of weak growth and stagnant incomes.

The economy lost a staggering 20.5 million jobs in April, the steepest plunge in payrolls since the Great Depression of the 1930s, as businesses were locked down to slow the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the virus. "We are on the back end of the first wave of lay-

offs, but now we are transitioning from the natural-disaster phase to the recession phase," said Josh Wright, chief economist at Wrightside Advisors in New York. "That's why so many white collar jobs are still being lost. We effectively amputated a large section of the economy, and we are going to limp along afterwards."

Initial claims for state unemployment benefits likely totaled a seasonally adjusted 2.5 million for the week ended May 9, according to a Reuters survey of economists. While it still would be an astoundingly high number, that would be down from 3.169 million in the prior week. Claims have been gradually decreasing since hitting a record 6.867 million in the week ended March 28. Last week's filings would lift the number of people who filed claims for unemployment benefits to about 36 million since March 21, nearly a quarter of the working age population. Still, April was probably the trough in job losses during this downturn, which has also been marked by the

sharpest decline in output since the 2007-09 Great Recession.

Application backlogs

In addition to workers in industries and jobs not initially affected by the coronavirus shut-downs, economists attribute the continued elevation in claims to the processing of application backlogs, which accumulated as state unemployment offices were overwhelmed by the unprecedented wave of applications.

Many parts of the country are reopening and states and local governments are laying out plans to restart their economies. But with businesses and factories operating well below capacity, and fears of a second round of COVID-19 infections, economists do not anticipate a dramatic improvement in the labor market. Some businesses have accessed loans from an almost \$3 trillion fiscal package, which could be partially forgiven if they used the credit for employee salaries. But many small enterprises are expected to close

permanently, leaving some of the 21.4 million people who lost their jobs in March and April out of work. To gauge the depth of the unemployment problem, attention will shift to the number of people staying on jobless benefits rolls.

Yesterday's claims report is expected to show the number of people receiving benefits after an initial week of aid raced to a record 25.1 million in the week ended May 2 from 22.647 million in the prior week, according to the Reuters survey.

The so-called continuing claims data is reported with a one-week lag. "We would expect a peak should arrive sometime in late May or June, with continuing claims falling as rehiring resumes," said Andrew Hollenhorst, an economist at Citigroup in New York. "The speed of the decline will indicate how fast rehiring is occurring."

The unemployment rate jumped to 14.7 percent in April, breaking the post-World War Two record of 10.8 percent touched in November 1982, from 4.4 percent in March. — Reuters

Business

Kuwait COVID-19 impact survey finds 45% of businesses have shut down since Feb

Survey warns of collapse of viable, established, Kuwaiti businesses

KUWAIT: Since Kuwait instituted lockdowns to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus last March, 45 percent of Kuwaiti business owners said they have suspended or shutdown their businesses. Another 26 percent are on the verge of collapse after seeing their revenue drop by more than 80 percent, revealed a Business Impact Survey published by Bensirri PR (BPR), an independent corporate, financial and political communications firm based in Kuwait. The report is the only COVID-19 related Business Impact Survey conducted in Kuwait and is available in full and free of charge on Kuwait-Impact.com.

Key Survey Findings:

1. Business closure rates are high, more closures expected

To date, 45 percent of respondents have suspended or shutdown their businesses. Another 26 percent on the verge of collapse after seeing their revenue drop by more than 80 percent. With full curfew enacted in Kuwait on May 11th, more closures are expected.

2. Delay in legislation led to acts of survival in violation of existing laws

In a desperate act of survival, 32 percent of respondents have adjusted employee hours or salaries in clear violation of Kuwait's labor law.

15 percent have already started laying off staff instead of waiting for legislation to pass as Kuwait enters its third month of the crisis.

3. Shops closed, expenses remain, and government support absent

Now in their third month of working capital pressure, 56 percent of business owners / CEOs say they cannot afford to cover their fixed costs for another two months under the new status quo.

4. Most impacted sectors to date are Retail, Contracting, and Professional services (measured by revenue drop and status of operation)

The Kuwait Business Impact Survey (KBIS) gathered key insights from 498 Kuwaiti businesses that were profitable in 2019 across 13 different sectors, and provides decision-makers with a direction to better understand policy decisions surrounding the future and sustainability of the Kuwaiti economy in a post-COVID-19 environment. The survey was distributed between April 24 and April 28, 2020, during the partial curfew period and prior to the full lockdown announced that went into effect on May 11, 2020. The respondents were asked about the change in operations under COVID-19, their predictions on business outlooks, and their assessment of the Kuwaiti government's response and responsibility during the outbreak.

"This is a difficult period for the private sector in Kuwait, as they have taken many painful steps to weather the short-term economic impact", said BPR Communication Manager and the lead on the report, Mohammed Al-Mutawa. "The survey's objective is to ground the conversation about the impact of COVID-19 on local businesses with facts and numbers to help business owners and policymakers stay informed and navigate the current and future economic landscape."

When asked about their outlook on market recovery, 45 percent of Kuwaiti business owners expect slower economic activity to extend into 2021. While 52 percent said it will take up to two full years for revenue to return to 2019 levels.

The survey also found that only 15 percent of business owners are fully aware of the economic stimulus package announced by the Kuwaiti government, and 81 percent of respondents said that current government policies are harmful to their business when asked about their sentiment towards the government's handling of the economy.

KBIS also conducted a sector-specific analysis for 13 different sectors across the economy to look at contrasting issues and found the following as most hurting:

- 36 percent of Retail have suspended operations, while 46 percent had a revenue drop by more than 50 percent but were still operating when the survey was conducted

- 39 percent of Construction, Contracting, Architecture have suspended operations, while 31 percent had a revenue drop by more than 80 percent but were still operating when the survey was conducted

- 46 percent of Professional Services have suspended operations, while 37 percent had a revenue drop by more than 50 percent but were still operating when the survey was conducted

Al-Mutawa concluded, "It is crucial now more than ever to give voices to these businesses that continue to suffer in the midst of the lockdown policies, as 45 percent of businesses have suspended operations while 61 percent are suffering from working capital drain the majority of which don't expect to last for another 2 months. The business environment as we know it is going through unprecedented and constant changes, and with the implementation of the full lockdown, we anticipate worsening figures across sectors in the coming few months. We hope this report positively contributes to the national conversation and equips policymakers with needed information to make timely and constructive decisions."

Australians warned worse to come after job losses

SYDNEY: Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison warned citizens to brace for more bad news as data released yesterday showed the country's monthly job losses rose to a record high because of coronavirus lockdown measures. The unprecedented employment data provided a stark illustration of the pandemic's effect on the national economy, which had experienced an unbroken run of growth for more than two decades.

Compounding concerns about the economic hit is a diplomatic spat with China, Australia's largest trading partner, sparked by Morrison's call for an international inquiry into the origins of the new coronavirus. "This is a tough day for Australia, a very tough day," Prime Minister Scott Morrison said in a televised media briefing. "Terribly shocking, although not unexpected."

The Australian Bureau of Statistics data showed 594,300 jobs were lost in April, the largest fall on record, underscoring Morrison's decision to slowly begin reopening the country. The unemployment rate shot up to 6.2 percent, the highest since September 2015, from 5.2 percent in March. That was lower than the 8.3 percent forecast by economists

in a Reuters poll, largely due to a significant decline in the number of people looking for work, including some people who are receiving an emergency "job-seeker" payment from the government.

If those people were included, the statistics office said, the unemployment rate would spike to 9.6 percent, the highest since 1997.

"The terms 'unprecedented' and 'extraordinary' are used regularly to describe the effects of COVID-19 on the economy but when discussing the impact on the job market, the terms are appropriate," said Craig James, chief economist at the Commonwealth Bank of Australia.

Australia imposed strict social distancing measures in March to tackle the pandemic, closing its borders to all non-citizens and ordering people to stay home unless on essential business. Pubs, sports centres, libraries and other public buildings were closed while cafes and restaurants were restricted to takeaway services.

Many shops and other businesses not explicitly ordered to close did so anyway in response to a drop in demand as people stayed home. Officials have credited the lockdown measures with constraining the spread of the virus. Australia has recorded about 7,000 COVID-19 cases, including 98 deaths, significantly below the levels reported in North America and Europe. New South Wales and Victoria, Australia's two most populous states, on Thursday reported just 13 new cases between them, including infections linked to an outbreak at a meat factory and a McDonald's Corp restaurant.

Morrison yesterday stressed the need to move



SYDNEY: Butcher George Vourvahakis holds a leg of an Australian lamb at his store in the Melbourne suburb of Yarraville. — AFP

ahead with his government's three-step plan to remove all social distancing restrictions by July, a program that Treasurer Josh Frydenberg has said would increase gross domestic product by A\$9.4 billion each month.

Reopening the economy has been partly overshadowed, however, by a row with China, which took around 38 percent of all Australia's exports last year,

over Australia's push for the coronavirus inquiry.

China earlier this week suspended the export licenses of several of Australia's largest beef processors and proposed tariffs of 80 percent on Australian barley shipments, actions viewed as retaliatory following a warning by Chinese ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye that Chinese consumers could boycott Australian products. — Reuters

Business

Fed's Powell calls for more fiscal support

WASHINGTON: The head of the Federal Reserve warned on Wednesday of an "extended period" of weak economic growth, vowed to use the US central bank's power as needed, and called for additional fiscal spending to stem the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell issued his sober review of an economy slammed by a record pace of job losses and bracing for worse ahead as most US states moved toward reopening after weeks of shutdowns aimed at slowing the spread of the novel coronavirus. The pandemic has killed more than 82,000 people in the United States so far, and many epidemiological models now point to a death toll that will surpass 100,000 in a matter of weeks. Powell pointed to uncertainty over how well future outbreaks of the virus can be controlled and how quickly a vaccine or therapy can be developed, and said policymakers needed to be ready address "a range" of possible outcomes.

"It will take some time to get back to where we were," Powell said in a webcast interview with Adam Posen, the director of the Peterson Institute for International Economics. "There is a sense, growing sense I think, that the recovery may come more slowly than we would like. But it will come, and that may mean that it's necessary for us to do more." For a central banker who spent part of his career as a deficit hawk and has tried to avoid giving advice to elected officials, the remarks marked an extraordinary nod to the risks the US economy is facing from the combined health and economic crisis brought on by the pandemic.

The US central bank has slashed interest rates to near zero and set up a broad network of programs to ensure financial markets continue to function during the pandemic. It has also established precedent-setting lending facilities for companies and the first-ever corporate bond purchases.

Congress, for its part, has allocated nearly \$3 trillion for economic relief during the crisis. The US response to date "has been particularly swift and forceful," Powell said. But the longer those health risks persist, he said, the more likely businesses will fail and households will be strapped for income in a downturn that he noted has fallen most heavily on those least able to cope. A recent Fed survey, Powell said, estimated that 40% of households with less than \$40,000 in income included someone who has lost a job since February.

The worst-case outcome leaves the economy mired in "an extended period of low productivity growth and stagnant incomes ... Additional fiscal support could be costly but worth it if it helps avoid long-term economic damage and leaves us with a stronger recovery," Powell said in what amounted to a direct call for Congress to ramp up its aid during the crisis.

"This trade-off is one for our elected representatives, who wield powers of taxation and spending," he said.

Negative rates

The Fed, for its part, will continue to "use our tools to their fullest until the crisis has passed and the economic recovery is well under way," Powell said. But those tools, he made clear, don't include pushing interest rates below zero, as some other central banks did fighting the global financial crisis more than a decade ago. Negative interest rates, he said, are "not something that we are considering."

Major US stock indexes were sharply lower in midday trading, with the benchmark S&P 500 index down about 1.6 percent. Yields on Treasury securities fell, and some contracts in interest rate futures markets continued to price in a small chance the Fed might resort to a negative-rates policy within the year.

The US House of Representatives and Senate are deliberating further responses to the pandemic. White House officials have said they want to assess how an initial round of economic reopenings by states goes before deciding what to do.

An increasing number of US governors have lifted restrictions, moves that in other countries have preceded new outbreaks and increases in cases, and that epidemiologists here fear will do the same.

But with the US economy having lost a staggering 20.5 million jobs in April alone and some 33 million Americans applying for jobless benefits since late March, many state and local leaders have begun to see the economic risks of continued lockdowns as too high. In a Senate hearing on Tuesday, Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, spoke of the risk the country could "paradoxically" end up worse off if it reopens too haphazardly and ends up with not just new rounds of infections, but a second wave of restrictions on who can go to work and what businesses can stay open. —Reuters



Al-Hamra Kuwait Lowest Bidder in Ministry of Public Works Tender to Resolve Water Gathering Issue in Sabah Al Ahmad City

Al-Hamra Kuwait is pleased to announce that it is the lowest bidder for the Ministry of Public Works project No. HT/287 following the recent opening of bids. The works will include the supply, installation and operation of pumps, as well as construction of pipes, which will be used to transfer water to the tanks of Public Authority for Agriculture and Fisheries Affairs, thereby solving the issue of water gathering in Sabah Al Ahmad City. Al-Hamra Kuwait submitted the lowest bid of KD 4,786,000.

Using engineering best practices, for which Al Hamra Kuwait is known, the company will establish two pumping stations at the end of the sewage drainage lines. Then a 400-millimeter centrifuge line will pump water from the two pumping stations to the irrigation tanks which are more than ten (10) kilometers from the stations. A 1200-millimeter emergency line will also be able to move excess water into a six (6) kilometer collecting pit.

Commenting on the project Eng. Amr Helmy, Chief Operating Officer of Al-Hamra Kuwait, said, "This project is crucial to solving the issue of water gathering in Sabah Al Ahmad City. Al-Hamra Kuwait is proud to be able to support the Government of Kuwait by addressing and alleviating infrastructure issues such as these. The Ministry of Public Works and the Government of Kuwait are keen to move forward with solving this issue despite the challenging circumstances that Kuwait and the world are facing due to COVID-19."

Eng. Helmy continued by adding, "Al-Hamra Kuwait was founded in 1971, and as a leading EPC contractor has been delivering complex and challenging projects around the Middle East. As such, we look forward to working in concert with the Ministry and relevant authorities to complete this project as quickly as possible once work is able to commence, despite its complexity. As always Al-Hamra Kuwait will be simultaneously focused on the safety of its workers and delivering this project."

Business

Europe nears crisis plan for public stakes in key firms

Plan seen as key part of recovery fund

LONDON/FRANKFURT/BRUSSELS: EU officials are seeking to finalize a plan for public stakes to be taken in key European companies to shield them from the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, three sources familiar with the matter told Reuters.

The European Union is looking to take decisive, unified action to support corporates after plans to help struggling southern states became mired in dispute and led to some politicians questioning the future of the European project. On May 5, after weeks of negotiations, France called for “an equity fund, either to recapitalize or to acquire shares in strategic companies that need capital, especially for those operating in European strategic value chains”, according to a proposal submitted to the EU commission and seen by Reuters.

One favored option is the creation of a central “solvency support” scheme, funded by member states, to direct investments into companies deemed systemically important, according to the three sources familiar with the discussions. Another could see European companies issue convertible bonds to the European Investment Bank, the EU’s lending arm, that could later turn into an equity stake, said two of

the sources. A spokeswoman for the European Commission declined to comment.

While all member states have largely embraced the idea of such investment, its governance has proved a stumbling block along traditional fault lines, said the sources who declined to be named as the negotiations are confidential. Italy and France want the new scheme to prioritize support for companies in countries worst hit by the coronavirus pandemic and economic slump, and with fewer financial resources at their disposal, according to the sources.

But German officials have asked for more visibility on the benefits that Europe’s largest economy will get from ploughing a large chunk of the cash into the scheme, they said. Much of the detail surrounding any scheme to protect companies – and not just states – is yet to be finalized. A broad announcement on it is expected in the coming days as part of a trillion-euro plan for a recovery fund, the sources said.

European champions

The plan to take stakes in companies is inspired by previous proposals backed by France and Italy to strengthen Europe’s “strategic” industries. Last August, EU officials examined the creation of an EU

sovereign wealth fund to invest in European champions in sectors where Europe lags behind global rivals such as technology, according to an internal document seen by Reuters that mentioned stepping up competition with US giants such as Apple and Google as well as China’s Alibaba.

This plan stalled in the autumn, and the wealth fund never materialized. But the broad idea of the bloc investing in major companies was revived by Italian and French officials after the coronavirus hit Europe as a way to overcome the stalemate on debt mutualization, the sources said. It was also championed by internal market commissioner Thierry Breton as a way to protect systemically important businesses in Europe and deter any unwanted takeover or stake-building from outside actors.

Concerns over the vulnerability of some European companies grew in April when it emerged that Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund had amassed stakes in four European oil majors, including France’s Total and Italy’s ENI. Another method of investing in companies being examined by EU officials is by making greater use of an agency that takes small stakes in companies, the European Fund for Strategic Investment, to bolster businesses struck by the pan-



FRANKFURT: This file photo shows Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank (ECB), addressing journalists during a press conference in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. —AFP

demic, one source said.

Since it was set up in 2015, the fund has made roughly 1.9 billion euros of small investments in companies specializing in life science, renewable energy and digitalization. The 27-member bloc is also looking at using its central budget to give guarantees to the European Investment Bank that would, in turn, hand out loans to companies struggling in the slump, another source said. —Reuters

Lebanon launches IMF talks to rescue economy

BEIRUT: Lebanon began talks with the International Monetary Fund on Wednesday, aiming to secure some \$10 billion of badly needed aid to help the country out of the worst financial crisis in its history. Tough negotiations lie ahead for Lebanon, which will be expected to enact economic reforms its sectarian leaders have long avoided if Beirut hopes to secure international aid, analysts say.

With Lebanon in a coronavirus lockdown, the first round of talks began via videoconferencing. “We are comfortable with the atmosphere of these initial discussions, and we expect that the upcoming discussions will be equally constructive,” Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni said in a statement.

Beirut officially asked for IMF assistance earlier this month, in what Prime Minister Hassan Diab called a “historic moment” for a country facing the biggest threat to its stability since the 1975-90 civil war.

The talks will be based on a government rescue plan which maps out tens of billions of losses in the financial system. An international support group including the United States and France said in a statement the decision to request an IMF program was “a first step in the right direction”. Domestic political support was “necessary for successful conduct and rapid completion of negotiations with the IMF”, the support group noted, hinting at the need for consensus among Lebanon’s fractious politicians. —Reuters

Collapse in consumption dragging down global economic outlook: IMF

WASHINGTON: A collapse in consumption and other data point to a downward revision of the International Monetary Fund’s already pessimistic outlook for the global economy given the global coronavirus pandemic, a top IMF official said on Wednesday.

IMF chief economist Gita Gopinath said economic data gathered since April were confirming the IMF’s forecast for a 3 percent contraction in global economic output, and pointed toward potentially worse scenarios.

“If anything, it looks like the outlook will worsen,” she told a conference hosted by the Financial Times newspaper, adding that the collapse of consumption would likely “lead to downward revisions.”

In April, the IMF underscored the high level of uncertainty around its outlook, noting that a longer, deeper crisis could result in a contraction of 6 percent for 2020 and zero percent growth in 2021.

“No country is being spared, and the numbers that you see coming in are historical lows,” she said, noting that developing countries and emerging market economies were at particular risk. Gopinath said there was a possibility of recovery after countries began easing widespread lockdowns, as long as there was sufficient testing for COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, contact tracing for those who got infected and appropriate quarantining of those who become ill.

She pointed to a rebound in China, where external demand remained weak but domestic demand was picking up. In an apparent reference to increased tensions between the United States and China, Gopinath said it was imperative to de-escalate trade tensions and impairment of cross-border capital flows to avoid further harm to the global economy.

“If we want to have a recovery where we have firms reopening, production taking place (and) people being rehired ... we cannot have a further breakdown in global supply chains,” she said. Gopinath also underscored

the need to provide ample liquidity for countries hit hard by the crisis, noting the needs of emerging economies and developing countries would likely exceed the \$2.5 trillion the IMF had initially forecast.

All options remained on the table, she said, despite resistance by the United States to an allocation of the IMF’s Special Drawing Rights currency, which is akin to a central bank “printing” new money.

“We’ve been very clear to the membership about what the needs will be – and they will be substantial,” she said.

UN warning

The world economy is projected to shrink by 3.2 percent in 2020 after the coronavirus pandemic sharply restricted economic activity, increased uncertainty and sparked the worst recession since the depression, the United Nations said on Wednesday.

A report by the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs said there would likely only be a gradual recovery of lost output in 2021. In January, the department had projected world economy growth of between 1.8 to 2.5 percent this year. “The world economy is expected to lose nearly \$8.5 trillion in output in 2020 and 2021, nearly wiping out the cumulative output gains of the previous four years,” the report released on Wednesday said. The new coronavirus, which causes the respiratory illness COVID-19, has infected some 4.3 million people globally and more than 291,000 have died, according to a Reuters tally. The virus first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

Businesses were shut down and hundreds of millions of people around the world were told to stay home to stop the spread as scientists rush to develop treatments and a vaccine. The UN report said the pandemic showed how economic and public health “are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing.”

“Countries may seek to reduce inter-dependence, and shorten supply chains, as many may consider the potential costs of a crippling pandemic too high relative to the benefits they receive from economic integration and interdependence,” it said.

“The fight against the pandemic — if it continues for too long and its economic price becomes too high — will fundamentally reshape trade and globalization,” it added. —Reuters

Red Bull Street Style 2020 tournament kicks off on 18 May

Freestyle football is mind-blowing art of performing tricks with a football



KUWAIT: The world's most important freestyle football tournament will not only go on in 2020 – it will be more inclusive than ever. After over a decade of World Finals in front of crowds on five continents, Red Bull Street Style will take the official World Championship of freestyle football entirely online. Anyone can enter by submitting a video clip.

Through a series of challenges, the field will be narrowed until the best international men and women – from reigning titleholders to hungry newcomers – turn it up in a live online World Final streamed globally. Entry from Kuwait opens on 18 May 2020 at 12:00am CET.

Freestyle football is the mind-blowing art of performing tricks with a football, and Red Bull Street Style is the sport's premier event. The current global situation has seen freestyle soar even higher in popularity, because it can be done individually anywhere, anytime. All you

need is a ball.

"This online season of Red Bull Street Style could not have come at a better time, and it's unique: There has never been a freestyle competition on this scale that's online and open to everyone," says Steve Elias, President of the World Freestyle Football Association (WFFA). "We're going to see all the top stars and also discover new faces who never had a chance to enter before. It's exciting."

Red Bull Street Style 2020 is open to everyone across the globe, everywhere, in every single country, including from Kuwait. The format has five stages. The first begins when the entry window opens at 12:00am CET on 18 May 2020. At www.redbullstreetstyle.com, everybody from across the planet is invited to submit a video with a 30-second set showing their all-round skills, which will be reviewed by judges selected by the WFFA. Of the thousands ex-

pected to enter, only the best – the top 200 men and top 60 women – will advance.

Subsequent stages will serve up specific challenges related to musicality, trick execution, and creativity. With each, the field is whittled further, while the global exposure, including live performances, grows higher.

Finally, 16 men and 8 women will face off in Stage 5, the battle of the online World Final, streamed live worldwide. Among them are anticipated to be the defending World Champions, who get an automatic berth in Stage 4: Reigning freestyle queen Mélody Donchet of France is the only person, woman or man, to have captured three Red Bull Street Style titles. Ricardo "Ricardinho" Fabiano Chahini de Araújo is the first Brazilian to hold the men's crown.

Launched in 2008, Red Bull Street Style aims to find the best overall freestyle football player in the world. The sport is all about combining

out-of-the-box creativity with out-of-the-ordinary skills. The most creative, technical and stylish player in each gender is crowned Red Bull Street Style World Champion. The elite judging panel has included such legends as Roberto Carlos, Gary Neville, Fabio Cannavaro, Edgar Davids, Luís "Nani" Almeida and Pável Pardo.

To enter qualifying for the Red Bull Street Style World Final in 2020, the requirements are simple: Videos must be no longer than 45 seconds overall, with the freestyle set lasting no longer than 30 seconds. They also must be in horizontal (landscape) format and without edits. No music is allowed. Everyone 16 or older is welcome to take part.

For submission details, deadline information, and all the news and updates on the Red Bull Street Style World Championship: www.redbullstreetstyle.com

MLB outlines player safety plans in 80-page memo

LOS ANGELES: Major League Baseball will send to players an outline of plans for player safety in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. According to Ken Rosenthal of The Athletic, the detailed outline covers 80 pages and provides a step-by-step return to spring training and beyond.

Owners approved restarting spring training with a goal of beginning the 2020 regular

around July 1. Under the plan, teams can hold spring training at their home ballparks or return to their usual spring training facilities in Florida or Arizona in mid-June.

The players association will review the player safety proposal this week, per reports, with the all-important discussion around financial fallout from a shortened season yet to take place.

Should games begin in July, fans will not be present in ballparks, and there is question as to whether all home stadiums will be available to host players-only games. Los Angeles County is expected to extend a stay-at-home order into July, which would impact the Los Angeles Dodgers and every team because the All-Star Game is scheduled to be held at Dodger Stadium on July 14. The game could be canceled or moved on the calendar or to a new venue.

Other states are opening the door for sports to come back even sooner. In Georgia, Florida and Arizona, governors have said there will be no limitations on baseball teams taking the field, provided social distancing and sanitization protocol can be established. Still, those games would not include fans.

Washington Nationals reliever Sean Doolittle expressed detailed concerns about a return to play given evidence that COVID-19 can cause permanent lung damage. He also said MLB must address frequency and volume of testing without taking away tests from the public at large and how a "second wave" of the coronavirus would be addressed.

MLBPA executive board member Andrew Miller of the St. Louis Cardinals had similar thoughts. Miller said in an ESPN interview that

he's not supportive of a return until safety is guaranteed. The NBA reportedly shared with its players on Friday that there will need to be a level of understanding around the likelihood of at least some positive tests.

"I don't think anything can be done until safety can be guaranteed and we feel comfortable with it," Miller said. "We want to put a good product on the field, but that's totally secondary to the health of the players. We are generally younger and healthier, but that doesn't mean our staff is, that doesn't mean umpires are going to be in the clear."

Baseball is being played in South Korea, but with several measures in place designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Players are tested daily, umpires wear masks, spitting is banned and high-fives are prohibited. — Reuters

Sports

Facemasks, silence and social distancing as pro golf resumes in South Korea

Without spectators the course was devoid of oohs and aahs, or even applause

YANGJU: Birdsong and the rattle of the ball dropping into the cup — accompanied by camera shutters — were the only sounds to be heard as professional women's golf entered the post-coronavirus era on a closed South Korean course yesterday.

Spectators were barred from the Lakewood Country Club as the KLPGA Championship got under way in Yangju, northeast of Seoul, with a host of social distancing measures in place to guard against infection.

South Korea is a power in the women's game, providing four of the current world top 10, three of whom are taking part in the normally low-profile domestic tournament.

It is the first high-level women's golf to be played since the US-based LPGA suspended its season in February, and with sports fans around the world starved of live action rights have been sold to broadcasters in countries including the US, Canada and Australia.

"Interest is very high since this is the first golf tour in the world amid the pandemic," the KLPGA said in a statement.

World number three and double major winner Park Sung-hyun, sixth-ranked Kim Seiyong — a nine-time winner on the LPGA Tour — and number 10 Lee Jeong-eun are part of a 150-strong field chasing the \$180,000 winner's cheque from a tournament purse of \$2.5 million, the highest in the event's 42-year history.

Players are advised to keep two metres apart on the course and minimise physical contact, while touching the pin without gloves is

prohibited.

They have to wear masks before and after their rounds, but can choose whether or not to do so during play, with most deciding to remain uncovered Thursday.

But with no spectators the course was devoid of oohs and aahs, or even applause, yesterday.

Playing without fans was a "pity", the sixth-ranked Kim said after her pre-tournament practice. "Usually a lot of fans show up, more here in Korea than in the US," she said. "But I'm thankful for just even being able to play."

Apart from the host broadcaster, media coverage on the course is restricted to the first and 10th tees, with personnel required to wear face masks throughout.

Everyone entering the course had their temperature checked and had to provide their personal information. And players have to eat their meals alone to maintain social distancing, with no caddies or family members allowed to sit at the same table in the lounge.

"At lunch all the golfers had to face the same direction while eating" without chatting, Park Sung-hyun said Wednesday. "All of this was quite new." The tournament comes after South Korea — which endured one of the worst early outbreaks of the disease outside mainland China but has brought it under control with a widespread "trace, test and treat" programme — saw professional football and baseball resume last week, also behind closed doors.

Only four LPGA Tour events have been completed this year — the last in Adelaide on Feb-



SEOUL: South Korean golfer Park Sung-hyun tees off in the first hole during the first round of the 42nd KLPGA Championship at Lakewood Country Club in Yangju, northeast of Seoul, yesterday. — AFP

ruary 16 — and the tour has outlined plans to resume in mid-July in Michigan.

The men's US PGA Tour, which came to a juddering halt when the Players Championship

was abandoned after the first round in March, has pencilled in a restart behind closed doors at the Charles Schwab Challenge beginning June 11 at Fort Worth, Texas. — AFP

Osaka using lockdown to conquer inner demons

TOKYO: Two-times Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka is using the novel coronavirus shutdown as one of self reflection to try and overcome her crippling shyness. The tennis season was suspended in early March due to the COVID-19 outbreak, and the hiatus will continue until at least mid-July with many countries in lockdown to contain the virus.

Japan's Osaka, who trains in the United States, the country worst affected by the flu-like virus with over 1.4 million infections and more than 83,000 deaths, is taking advantage of the extended break to do some soul searching.

"I think people know me as being really shy... I want to take the quarantine time to just think about everything, and for me, I have a lot of regrets before I go to sleep," Osaka told CNN Sport.

Petra Kvitova said last year Osaka would have to get used to having a target on her back after the Japanese

said she struggled to deal with increased scrutiny in the wake of her rise to the top of the world rankings.

"Most of the regrets are because I don't speak out about what I'm thinking. I feel like if I asserted myself, I would have gotten the opportunity to see what would have happened," Osaka said.

Osaka, who became the first Japanese player to attain the world number one ranking following her 2019 Australian Open victory, believes tennis is not a top priority at the moment.

"I want to take this time to learn something new because I'm pretty sure I won't have this much free time ever again. It's not like I'll forget how to play tennis," the world number 10 added.

With no access to gyms and tennis courts, the 22-year-old found a training partner in former world number one Venus Williams, with the two sharing a workout session on social media.

"I don't want to train five hours a day right now because I think that's how you get burned out and you never know when tournaments will start again," Osaka said.

"I did an Instagram live with Venus just now. It was kind of more intense than I thought it was going to be. "For some reason I thought we were going to be stretching, but yeah, we were doing a bit of movement drills and then lunges and stuff." — Reuters

Bittersweet Savea to leave Toulon rugby, eyes N Zealand return

WELLINGTON: Ex-All Blacks winger Julian Savea has announced his departure from Toulon, saying he plans to return to club rugby back home in New Zealand. "Thank you to those who have supported me over the past two seasons here at RCT," he said, referring to the star-studded club's French initials.

"I will forever be thankful for this experience and my time in Toulon." With the French season cut short by the coronavirus, Savea — who won 54 caps for New Zealand — said in an interview posted on his Instagram account that he would be "trying to get back into New Zealand rugby or find another contract".

"Very bittersweet moment not getting to end the season the way I wanted to, but also very excited for this next journey ahead of me," he said in a post on Wednesday. He acknowledged the process may take five or six months given restrictions on travel. "I want to thank all my brothers that I've played with over the past two seasons, you guys are very special to me and I've made some life-long friendships I will cherish forever." Savea previously played for the Hurricanes Super Rugby side, in his native Wellington. His announcement came as World Cup-winning winger Nehe Milner-Skudder revealed that he would play for Otago Highlanders in New Zealand's domestic Super Rugby competition rather than take up a planned three-year contract with Toulon. — AFP

Sports

Salzburg's US coach Marsch looks forward to football returning

'Right now there is a lot of optimism and excitement'

PARIS: Having become the first American to coach a team in the Champions League and overseen the remarkable rise of Erling Braut Haaland, it was already an unforgettable season for Jesse Marsch before the coronavirus pandemic came along.

Now the coach of Austria's Red Bull Salzburg is preparing his team to return to action after a two-month shutdown. Salzburg have already been back training in small groups but are set to resume collective training on Friday before the Austrian Bundesliga picks up again in early June.

"We had to all get tests today again to make sure that nobody had the virus. This is the second time that we have had tests," Marsch told AFP on Wednesday in a phone interview. "We will still have to keep distances in the locker room, and we will wear masks in the building. Even on the bench we will have to keep distances of one metre between players and coaching staff."

Unlike in Germany, where the league resumes this weekend, teams in Austria have not been forced into quarantine training camps. Indeed, if Germany has coped well enough with the pandemic to be able to bring back football, Austria has arguably done even better.

With its population of almost nine million, it has registered only 624 deaths from under 16,000 cases and began easing its lockdown in mid-April. "If you were here and you saw how people have followed the rules, how they wear masks, how they respect each other's space, it would give you a lot of confidence that the virus is well contained," says Marsch, who was assistant coach at RB Leipzig in Germany before moving to Salzburg last year.

The 46-year-old Wisconsin native spent lockdown in Salzburg with his wife and two sons. Their 18-year-old daughter stayed in Leipzig to finish high school but returned to the family before the border between the countries closed.

Salzburg have not played since March 8. While in lockdown,

Marsch focused on "family, friends and football" and — like everyone it seems — "did a lot of Zoom calls".

Now the season is returning, and Salzburg's first game is set to be the Cup final against second-division Austria Lustenau in late May. Then it will be back to the league, as the Red Bull club try to catch leaders LASK Linz and claim a seventh straight title. They are currently three points behind. "Right now there is a lot of optimism and excitement," admits Marsch.

Salzburg have found the going tougher since losing Haaland and Japan's Takumi Minamino to Borussia Dortmund and Liverpool respectively. Both were outstanding in Salzburg's Champions League campaign as they impressed against Liverpool and Napoli. Haaland, the 19-year-old Norwegian, scored 28 goals in 22 games before joining Dortmund and netting nine in his first eight German Bundesliga appearances.

"He is a freak, he physically is gifted in ways that very few people are. There is very little that he can't do in terms of the requirements of the game at the highest level," Marsch says.

"You could see in every training session and every test game, he had moments that were like 'wow', and those 'wow' moments got to be more and more until sometimes it would be a 90-minute performance."

If losing Haaland and Minamino in the winter was a blow, Marsch points out that youth development is central to the strategy of a club who have also polished players like Sadio Mane and Naby Keita. Salzburg gave him an opportunity too, to make a name for himself as an American coach in Europe.

"This is an experiment for me to see if my way of thinking, my way of leadership, of relationships, can function in the most competitive world of our sport here in Europe, although I understand Austria is not the highest level in Europe." He still keeps a close eye on goings-on at home, though, and has been supportive of the US women's national team who recently had their



Jesse Marsch

case to be paid the same as their male counterparts thrown out by a federal judge. "I just felt like those women earned more than the respect of everybody to be treated like heroes and with full respect," he says. "After the lawsuit getting thrown out, yeah I have emotions for that too, because I would like to see them treated fairly." — AFP

Britain's athletes must respect distancing in training

LONDON: Britain's elite athletes must respect guidelines on social distancing and be made aware of the risks when they resume individual performance training after the coronavirus lockdown, guidance published on Wednesday said. The document set out the terms for athletes in a first step towards allowing the return of live sport in the country. The government has said elite sport in England cannot return until at least June 1 and will have to take place without spectators present. "Enabling athletes to get match-fit is an important milestone towards restarting competitive sport behind closed doors — but we have not given a green light yet," said Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden.

"We are clear that this can only happen on the advice of medical experts and when it is safe to do so."

Training, at official elite venues under carefully controlled medical conditions, will require athletes to keep two metres apart at all times from their team mates and anyone outside

their household. "Organised training should only be resumed where government guidelines on social distancing can be adhered to, considering any terms of dispensation allowed for elite sport," the guidance said. It added that sports should outline how there will be regular screening for COVID-19 symptoms before athletes enter training environments.

All athletes and support staff will be expected to undergo one-to-one check-ups and briefings before any organised training which will also highlight sport-specific risks and the measures to mitigate them. The guidance also covers measures such as the deep cleaning of facilities. Guidance on the second step, to include "a level of social clustering" subject to medical experts giving the go-ahead, will come later. "It is important to note that the publication of this guidance does not mean that all Olympic and Paralympic sports and athletes should return to training straight away," said UK Sport chief executive Sally Munday. "Indeed, we fully expect different sports will return to training at different times."

"Each sport will need to make a risk assessment against the guidance and determine what is best for both their athletes and staff." Munday said returning to training was a personal choice and recognised there might be concerns or circumstances that made it challenging. The guidance on the resumption of elite training is here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-phased-return-of-sport-and-recreation/elite-sport-return-to-training-guidance-step-one>. — Reuters

Babar named ODI captain, Amir loses Pakistan contract

LAHORE: Pakistan named Babar Azam as their new captain in one-day internationals, putting the elegant batsman in charge of both their limited-overs teams after a stellar year with the bat.

The top order batsman, who took over Twenty20 captaincy earlier this year, succeeds Sarfaraz Ahmed as Pakistan's white-ball leader while Azhar Ali also got an extension as skipper of the test side for the 2020-21 season. "I want to congratulate Azhar Ali and Babar Azam for getting captaincy extensions," chief selector and head coach Misbah-ul-Haq said in a statement issued by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Wednesday.

"This is absolutely the right decision as they also require certainty and clarity on their future roles. "I am sure they will now start looking to the future and start planning so that they can build sides that can perform at the expected levels."

Babar has been a prolific scorer and currently ranks among the top five batsmen in all three formats. Professional cricket remains suspended because of the coronavirus pandemic but Pakistan are preparing for their tours of Ireland, England and South Africa as well as the Twenty20 World Cup in Australia in October-November.

Keeping the schedule in mind, PCB also handed out central contracts for the 2020-21 season, omitting the pace trio of Mohammad Amir, Wahab Riaz and Hasan Ali.—Reuters



SEOUL: South Korean golfer Choi Hye-jin tees off in the first hole during the first round of the 42nd KPGA Championship at Lakewood Country Club in Yangju, northeast of Seoul, yesterday. — AFP

Facemasks, social distancing as golf resumes in S Korea

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