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MPs, government to meet to study easing lockdown

KD 372m spent during coronavirus crisis • Reopening of mosques mullied

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The government will meet with lawmakers today to discuss issues related to the Cabinet decision to ease the total lockdown starting from Sunday. The government decided on Monday not to extend the total lockdown imposed from May 10 to 30 and said details of the easing of restrictions will be announced on Thursday following a meeting with MPs. Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah said on Twitter that Kuwait will enter a new phase at the

end of the lockdown period, but he did not provide any details.

MPs meanwhile said they want assurances that the decision is based entirely on health considerations and that commercial activities and the economy are not influencing a rushed reopening. MP Saadoun Hammad said lawmakers want to assess assurances on the health situation in the country, adding that the drop in the number of new cases does not mean the disease is on the decline, but because the number of tests conducted was lower.

The lawmakers will also pressure the government to reconsider its decision to provide financial rewards to frontline workers in the health and interior sectors in order to include other sectors, especially cooperative society volunteers. MPs also want to see a government decision on whether schools will reopen to complete the current school year, as a number of lawmakers want the education ministry to scrap the school year.

Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs Fahd Al-Afasi meanwhile discussed with top officials in the

two ministries about restarting courts and reopening mosques, while observing health measures.

The Audit Bureau meanwhile said that contracts worth KD 863 million were signed by various government agencies since the start of March, about KD 372 million of which were directly related to the coronavirus crisis. The bureau said half of the coronavirus-related contracts were struck by the health ministry. A number of lawmakers had called for an investigation into the contracts signed during the coronavirus crisis.

Dubai puts tech to test; backlash over Qatar app

DUBAI/DOHA: From smart police helmets to research labs, the novel coronavirus has given Dubai an opportunity to test its technological and scientific clout as it shapes its approach to the pandemic. A key part of the glitzy Gulf emirate's fight is its COVID-19 Command and Control Centre, set up to coordinate the efforts of Dubai's doctors, epidemiologists and other professionals.

It is hosted within the Mohammed Bin Rashid University of Medicine and Health Sciences (MBRU) in Dubai's Healthcare City, also home to state-of-the-art hospitals, labs and research centers. "For several years, Dubai has endeavored to put in place solid digital infrastructure, and this has contributed to the fight against the coronavirus", said Amer Sharif, who heads the multidisciplinary center.

It was established at the start of the health crisis by Dubai Crown Prince and social media star Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum. In one room, young mask-wearing men and women sit at carefully separated desks crunching

data on laptops and coordinating with workers on the ground. The initiative includes a scientific team whose role is "to stay abreast of the latest advances in research and scientific evidence, both in the country and elsewhere in the world", team head Alawi Alsheikh-Ali told AFP.

The UAE has carried out more than 1.6 million coronavirus tests, and has officially declared over 28,700 infections, including 244 deaths. This high-tech approach, Sharif said, including "the complete digitization of the health system", has prevented a greater spread of the virus and made the lockdown easier.

Tom Loney, associate professor of public health and epidemiology at MBRU, said the coronavirus was an opportunity for Dubai to put its capabilities to the test. "It's the ability to react, to make quick decisions based on data and science" that sets Dubai apart, said Loney, who is also an adviser to authorities in the city-state. According to him decisions were made by order of Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, whose portrait is featured on the MBRU building.

Many tech options were already at Dubai's fingertips when the pandemic struck, and the emirate was quick at putting its technology to a variety of uses during the virus crisis.

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DUBAI: Police officers monitor the streets and receive calls from citizens at the Command and Control Center of Dubai Police on Feb 24, 2020. — AFP

Religion looms large in Mideast virus 'infodemic'

BEIRUT: Mass conversions, immunity for Muslims: In the global maelstrom of disinformation spurred by the coronavirus, many of the more outlandish claims that went viral in the Middle East were religious-themed. Some analysts see this as the natural result of a society trying to come to terms with an unprecedented health pandemic.

"At times of inexplicable crisis and conflict, people revert to their cultural myths and convictions to make sense of what is going on," American University of Beirut (AUB) media studies professor Nabil Dajani said. "I observe that this is happening everywhere and not only in Islamic regions."

Globally, myths have circulated online including crackpot cures for COVID-19 and conspiracy theories about its alleged origins, with even world leaders touting false claims. In the Arabic-speaking world, AFP fact checkers have observed a trend for social media posts containing false religious-themed claims about the virus.

A video purporting to show Chinese people converting to Islam because the novel coronavirus "does not affect Muslims" was shared in Feb 2020. The clip, however, actually shows Tagalog-speaking people converting to Islam in Saudi Arabia in May 2019 - months before the first outbreak in China.

Another clip shared online claims to show Chinese people receiving copies of the Holy Quran after the country had lifted a "ban" on the Islamic holy book following the spread of coronavirus. It is actually a clip that has been circulating since at least 2013 on reports of copies of the Bible being distributed in China.

A video has appeared on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter along with a claim that it shows the

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Biden in stark contrast with Trump on virus

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden squared off with Donald Trump on Tuesday over the wearing of masks one day after the White House challenger emerged from coronavirus-imposed lockdown donning one while the president attended two events barefaced. By wearing a mask at a Memorial Day ceremony in Delaware - and by changing his Twitter profile to a photograph of him donning the black covering - Biden signalled he is putting the coronavirus front and center during the US presidential race in a nation increasingly divided over the pandemic.

After the president mocked him for his protective mask, Biden hit back, blasting Trump as an "absolute fool". It appeared to mark a new front in the war of words between the rival politicians. Trump also attended a somber Monday ceremony honoring America's fallen, in Baltimore. Instead of wearing a mask, he offered a defiant posture that has inspired some supporters, infuriated critics and poured fuel on the fiery debate about how to

respond to the disaster.

The images frame the stark contrast between an incumbent who wants to move on from the crisis, and a Democrat highlighting his trust in science and criticizing the president for a bungled, inadequate pandemic response. They also encapsulate a glaring political divide over how to respond to the deadly outbreaks and whether US states should fully reopen now or maintain lockdown status.

Throughout the three-month crisis Trump has been bare-faced in public, and on Monday the president attended two ceremonies uncovered, even as aides, military personnel and guests wore masks or face shields. Biden, whose public appearance Monday was his first since March, made a point of covering up. He and wife Jill Biden wore black masks over their noses and mouths as they laid a wreath at a veteran's memorial near their home city of Wilmington.

Trump retweeted a message that showed an AFP picture of Biden in his mask and sunglasses with commentary that mocked the look, even as Trump's own government advises wearing masks to slow the virus's spread. Biden's response? "He's a fool, an absolute fool, to talk that way," Biden told CNN. "Every leading doc in the world is saying you should wear a mask when you're in a crowd." Doing so "projects as leadership," Biden added.



Joe Biden

"Presidents are supposed to lead, not engage in folly and be falsely masculine."

Trump knows Americans are seeing the pandemic differently, and that the divide is largely partisan. New data reported on by US media shows that the deadly impacts of coronavirus have been disproportionately felt in areas of the country that voted Democratic in 2016, like the coasts and big cities. Several Republican-leaning areas meanwhile have been less seriously affected, deepening a partisan divide not just over how to respond to the crisis, but perception of its impact.

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Israel Lebanon pullout inspires Hezb recruits

MLEETA, Lebanon: Jalal was barely three years old when Israeli troops withdrew from Lebanon two decades ago, but he speaks fondly of the Hezbollah "victory" that shaped his allegiance to the Shiite group. "I feel honor and pride in this historic victory," said the 23-year-old who was brought up on stories of Hezbollah-led guerrilla operations leading to the Israeli pullout.

Founded in 1982 with backing from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards,

Hezbollah touts the 2000 pullout as the first Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab land under military pressure. Today Hezbollah, which means "Party of God", is both a militant group with involvement in several regional countries and a major political force in Lebanon.

The group remains an archfoe of Israel. Its military wing is blacklisted as a "terrorist" organization by many Western governments but, to the dismay of Israel and its close ally the United States, its political wing is blacklisted by rather fewer. Twenty years after the Israeli withdrawal, Hezbollah still enjoys wide support among Lebanese youth who grew up with tales of the Shiite group heroically ending 22 years of Israeli occupation.

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MARJAYOUN, Lebanon: In this file photo taken on May 24, 2000, Lebanese and Hezbollah fighters pose for a picture on and around a tank abandoned by the Israeli-allied South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia in this southern town, which was the headquarters of SLA and the Israeli occupation troops. — AFP

Crown Prince thanks Eid well-wishers, commends COVID-19 countermeasures

Battle against global-spreading disease far from over: Sheikh Nawaf

Pandemic Diaries

The light at the end of the tunnel

By Jamie Etheridge

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We can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. Kuwait's full curfew will end Saturday and on Sunday, the country will begin the process of reopening, albeit partially and in phases. Still it feels like a holiday or the achievement of some major milestone after all these weeks of partial curfew, isolation, lockdowns and the last 20 days.

No one knows what will happen next. The virus is still spreading and only a small percentage of the global population has been infected, meaning that the majority of us are still vulnerable. There are many uncertainties as well. Why has it ravaged some places like northern Italy or New York? Why hasn't everywhere that's been exposed suffered similar crises and death rates? Will there be a second or third wave of infections/deaths and will we possibly face another lockdown? How much longer will this go on and how many more people will die as a result of COVID-19?

As of today, we are at 5.7 million confirmed infections and more than 350,000 confirmed deaths from the coronavirus worldwide. But these represent only the known infections, and known deaths. There are suspected to be significantly more people who are or were infected without ever having been tested and possibly significantly more deaths as well.

The problem is that not everyone has been tested and in some places widespread testing will be impossible. Likewise, not every death caused by COVID-19 will be confirmed as such. Therefore, we may never know the full extent of the virus' spread or its lethality.

We look forward to the reopening of Kuwait, of a return to something like normality, with a mixture of hope and fear. We all want to get back to our normal lives, and to our daily routine. But we don't yet know at what cost this will come. We still have no vaccine and no herd immunity.

And so we stare ahead, into the light hoping that it is not an oncoming train, a new disaster about to happen, but instead some much needed sunlight and fresh air.



KUWAIT: Police officers man a checkpoint on Fahaheel Expressway near Abu Fatira during the first day of Eid Al-Fitr holiday. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah thanked on Tuesday citizens and expatriates alike for their Eid Al-Fitr greetings, commending at the same time all the efforts taken to counter the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). His Highness the Crown Prince lauded government, frontline responders, and the people for their current efforts to protect

the country and society from the menace of coronavirus, saying that the battle against the global-spreading disease was far from over. Helping medical staff and frontline responders is a dutiful mission that all people of the country must continue to honor in the upcoming period, affirmed His Highness Sheikh Nawaf who commended citizens and residents for their contributions to the fight against coronavirus. His Highness the Crown Prince wished for Kuwait and the world to overcome this pandemic, expressing his prayers for prosperity and development to the people of Kuwait under the guidance of His Highness the Amir

“ Helping frontlines a dutiful mission ”

Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

During its weekly meeting via video conference on Monday chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, the cabinet congratulated His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince and the Kuwaiti people on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr, praying to Allah the Almighty to eliminate coronavirus pandemic. The cabinet members discussed His Highness the Amir's recent speech in which he reiterated his praise of health care workers, security forces, public and private entities, and charity societies for their contributions to the fight against COVID-19, said Saleh. His Highness the Amir had called on the media to support anti-coronavirus efforts, and called for learning from lessons of this pandemic. The cabinet shared His Highness the Amir's concerns over the impacts of the pandemic and how more endeavors were needed to address challenges associated with the disease, Deputy Premier, Interior Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh said. — KUNA



In My View

Thank you social media

By Abdellatif Sharaa

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Usually at this time of the year, you will find me in Jordan, even if for one or two days, just to say hello to my mother and place a kiss on her forehead out of appreciation and gratitude for the sacrifices she made for me and my siblings. This year was different - no travel, not even going out of the house! I was worried about not being able to greet my mother in a proper manner, but a brother was able to hook us all through an app and we spoke with our mother face-to-face, and this gave us some comfort under the current circumstances. So here we give special thanks to social media!

Let me mention that my mother is in her eighties, my Allah bless her, and I am in my sixties, and she learned that I have a very painful gout bout, so she spoke to me as if I was six years old! A mother is a mother! So please respect your mothers no matter what, for they are heaven on earth!

Social media, a multi-edged weapon, has benefits and advantages, such as making us reach a large number of people at the same time and having a conversation clearly and directly, along with simple things like planning a trip by checking the traffic situation while you are still at home. One of the social media advantages was clear in the fight against COVID-19. As the cases were on the rise, officials started to have meetings online and made critical decisions on the spot, in addition to being able to contact any person around the world through such media.

For those who are interested in world news, they no longer have to wait for the evening news bulletins - rather it will be flashed instantly on their smart devices. Social media was able to keep the education process going through remote education, as many students in most stages benefited from lessons online.

Many are the benefits, but we cannot mention or explain them all in a column. Yet there are some species that look like human beings, but actually are snakes with the most dangerous venom, who spray it as false rumors on social media to misguide the society and raise false hopes. Others con people and cause them to lose their life savings, and even create cross-border crises between countries.

Let us be careful and use social media as it is supposed to be used, and reject all adverse content and let it go bankrupt.

Final Word: "The loneliest people are the kindest. The saddest people smile the brightest. The most damaged people are the wisest. All because they do not wish to see anyone else suffer the way they do." —Anon

Coronavirus in Kuwait: What we know so far

KUWAIT: Kuwait has recorded 23,267 cases infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) as of yesterday, in addition to 175 deaths. With the exception of 193 cases in intensive care, all infected cases are in stable condition and are recovering in quarantined locations designated by the government for this purpose, while thousands have been discharged from quarantine after exhibiting no symptoms during their 14-day quarantine period, the Ministry of Health confirmed. Meanwhile, 7,946 people have recovered completely after previously being infected with the virus, while there are 15,146 people receiving treatment and 2,619 quarantined.

Curfew

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

Precautions

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

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

Hotlines

The Ministry of Health has set the following hot-

lines to receive inquiries about the coronavirus 24/7: 24970967 - 96049698 - 99048619.

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

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

Medicine delivery

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

Amiri Hospital: 50880699
Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital: 50880755
Farwaniya Hospital: 50880852
Adan Hospital: 50880908
Jahra Hospital: 50881066
Sabah Hospital: 97632660
Jaber Hospital: 96992079
Ibn Sina Hospital: 99613948
Chest Hospital: 99258749
Razi Hospital: 97633487
Kuwait Cancer Control Center: 96735242
Psychiatric Hospital: 97350113
Physiotherapy Hospital: 99824037
Maternity Hospital: 98559531
As'ad Al-Hamad Dermatology Center: 98514508

Zain Hospital: 97552031
NBK Hospital: 96931761
Al-Rashed Allergy Hospital: 94162470
Infectious Diseases Hospital: 96989164
Palliative Care Hospital: 94024786
Sabah Al-Ahmad Urology Center: 90952469
KFH Addiction Treatment Center: 94169363

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

Mental health assistance

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

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

Local

Kuwait braces today for govt details on restoring normal life

Full curfew contributed to improving the situation in the country



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the cabinet's weekly meeting via video conference on Monday. — KUNA photos



Defense Minister Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah attends the meeting.



Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah attends the meeting.

KUWAIT: The government plans today to announce more details about the gradual restoration of normal life in Kuwait. The government had announced during a meeting Monday that there were no plans to extend the full curfew, which is due to end Saturday. Instead, Kuwait will transition back to partial curfew to pave way for restoration of normal life, Deputy Premier and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh said. Saleh, also Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, made those statements during an online press conference following a cabinet meeting to discuss how to restore normal life in the coming days. The meeting was held via video conference and chaired by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

The government was expecting improvement of the health situation due to compliance with the full curfew, which entered force on May 10. "I would like to thank everyone for their great commitment to the full curfew and hopeful this commitment will continue with the partial curfew," said Saleh.

Situation improvement

Saleh said the Ministry of Health believed the full curfew contributed to improving the situation in the country. Saleh, meanwhile, said the government

formed a committee with a mandate of honoring those working in the frontline in line with His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's instructions. Bader Al-Hamad, Undersecretary of the Civil Services Commission (CSC), spoke in the same news conference about rewarding the employees working between February 24 and May 31 financially. He said the committee classified employees work-

employees working in supporting lines who were assigned to work during the partial or full curfew. Those employees, continued Hamad, would be honored in accordance with the degree of risk they were exposed to: high and medium. He said the government would consider people dying from the virus as martyrs, and infectees would be given a special allowance until their recovery.

Treatment mechanism

The Ministry of Health also adopted a fresh mechanism for dealing with medical staff infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). If someone from medical teams unluckily contracts the virus, he or she will be home-quarantined and then be tested on the fifth day of infection, the ministry's Undersecretary Dr Mustafa Redha said in a separate statement Monday. In case of negative tests, he or she will be allowed to get back to work, provided that personal protection kits be used, he stressed. Confirmed positive cases will be placed under home quarantine and be then tested on the 12th or 13th day and in case of negative tests, then they will be able to return to work on the 14th day, he elaborated.

Workers' accommodation

In the meantime, the government adopted a set of decisions dealing with



Deputy Premier, Interior Ministry and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh attends the meeting.

quarantine facilities and improving accommodation of workers amidst spread of coronavirus. The cabinet assigned the Public Authority of Sport to hand over the halls in Tadamon Sport Club to the quarantine team to be transformed into a field emergency unit to support Farwaniya Hospital, government spokesman Tareq Al-Mezrem told the online press conference. The cabinet, he added, obliged all companies to provide housing units for their workers who were infected with coronavirus. Those units, he said, should be equipped with all necessary needs in

line with Ministry of Health's instructions. The government, said Mezrem, assigned Ministry of Finance to lease hotels to be used as quarantine facilities. The government also assigned the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources to coordinate with Kuwait Flour Mills Company to provide fodder to livestock owners. The authority should also coordinate with Public Authority for Industry and the Environment Public Authority (EPA) to study possible establishment of light-industry factories within the farm land, used as recycling wasted fodder. — KUNA



Treatment mechanism for infected medics

ing during the pandemic crisis into three segments. The first were employees of the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Health who were directly dealing with infected people and suspected infectees, said Hamad.

The second, he added, were people working in government departments who were dealing with suspected cases, working in border crossings, quarantine facilities and clinics. The third category, said Al-Hamad, were

News in brief

Kuwait reports 640 new recoveries

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah yesterday confirmed the recovery of 640 additional novel coronavirus (COVID-19) patients, bringing the total number of recoveries to 7,946 so far. Lab analyses and medical tests showed that the patients were cured of the coronavirus, the minister said in a press statement. The cured patients will be taken to recuperation wards before being discharged from hospital within a couple of days' time, it noted.

Co-op staff infected

KUWAIT: Al-Mangaf Co-op Society announced yesterday that two of its employees tested positive for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The central market and all branches will be closed until further notice for sterilization.

19 curfew violators

KUWAIT: Police arrested 19 curfew violators on Tuesday, including 13 Kuwaitis and six expats, the Ministry of Interior announced. The arrests took place as follows: Five in the Capital governorate, two in Hawally, seven in Farwaniya, one in Jahra, two in Mubarak Al-Kabeer and two in Al-Ahmadi Governorate.

FM calls Madagascar counterpart

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah Monday held a phone call with his counterpart in the Republic of Madagascar Dr Tehindrazanarivelo Djacoba Liva. The two sides discussed the strategy of deporting residency-law violators and coordinating their deportation flights within the following days. They also considered bilateral ties between the two friendly countries and frameworks for enhancing cooperation towards facing the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic.

Stay safe. Stay home. Stay informed

Kuwait Times
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The First Daily in the Arabian Gulf



Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A deserted playground at a park in Kuwait during the first day of Eid Al-Fitr. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

ICSK organizes first of its kind virtual investiture ceremony

KUWAIT: The Indian Community School Kuwait (ICSK) Senior organized a virtual investiture ceremony on May 16, 2020 in order to officially declare the newly elected student members of the school senate. ICSK Senior consists of a judicial core senate which consists of student members and senate advisors also. The main motive behind the formation of the senate is to equally divide duties and responsibilities to the student senate members for the smooth functioning of the school by the student senate members. ICSK Senior consists of four houses named as the Leaders House, Victors House, Winners House and Achievers House. The Members of the Houses are also a part of the senate.

In order to select new members of the senate for the academic year 2020-2021 during this pandemic situation, the ICSK Senior School, introduced a very distinctive rostrum to the children for the wise selection of members for the senate through systematic election procedures.

An online election was organized through the ICSK mobile application for the children from the grass root level and the members of the senate and also the prefects were chosen wisely and unanimously.

For the very first time in the history of Middle East, The Indian Community School Kuwait Senior, shared a very unique platform for investing the duties and responsibilities upon the newly elected senate members for the academic year 2020-2021, due to the ongoing pandemic crisis all over the world. A virtual investiture ceremony was organized on 16th May 2020 at 11.45 am by the ICSK Senior School team, which had Lieutenant Colonel Sir Jason M. Belknap, the Army Attache, Embassy of the USA. The other dignified dignitaries were the Board of Trustees of The Indian Community School Kuwait, Shaik Abdul Rahiman the

Honorary Chairman, Vinukumar Nair the Honorary Vice Chairman, Azharuddin Amer Mohammed Honorary Secretary, Agnello Antonio Sebastio Fernandes Honorary Joint Secretary, S. N Raju Honorary Treasurer, the Principals of ICSK branch schools, K. Gangadhar Principal Khaitan Branch, Dr Sam T Kuruvilla Vice Principal Khaitan Branch, Rajesh Nair Principal Amman Branch, Dr Mary Isaac Vice Principal Amman Branch, Shirley Dennis Principal Junior Branch, Dr V Binumon Principal being the visionary of such a sensational and epic program which was the first of its kind were also present with Susan Rajesh Vice Principal ICSK Senior Branch and Mini Shaji Deputy Vice Principal ICSK Senior Branch. The Virtual Investiture Ceremony was organized to officially declare the elected designates and handover the duties to the respective designates.

The program got its carpet rolled with the Islamic prayer by Rida Faisal Khan followed by a mellifluous prayer song by the ICSK Senior Musical Band Swaranjali and the national anthems of Kuwait and USA.

The welcome address was delivered by Tanaz Jeffrey Cabral, the Acting President of the school senate for the month of February and March 2020. Mini Shaji Deputy Vice Principal also introduced the house mentors for the academic year 2020-2021. The Senate Advisor of ICSK Senior Indira Radhakrishnan introduced the Senate members for the academic year 2020-2021.

The core senate members of ICSK Senior for the academic year 2020-2021 are as follows: Cebin Biju Panicker of 12 G is elected as the President of the School senate for the academic year 2020-2021. The first Vice President is Jesu Joel of 11 C and the second Vice President is Deepak Devendra Nayak of class 11 J.

Mariyam N Shihabuddeen of 12 G has been elected as the Arts Club Secretary, Surabhi Shah of 10 E has been designated the post of Assistant Arts Club Secretary. Arnold Jerome of 12 D has been unanimously chosen as the Sports Captain and Muskaan of class 9E as the Assistant Sports Captain. Joven C Jose of 11 A has been elected as the Student Editor and Johann Premjith of class 9E as the Assistant Student Editor.

Ethan Emmanuel of 12 E is the Leaders House Captain and Leaders House Assistant Captain is Sanjana Kiran of class 11 E. Ashwin Sanjay Nair of class 12 E is Victors House Captain and Niyanth of 11E is the Assistant House Captain of Victors House. Danielle Hannah Monteiro of 12F is the Winners House Captain and Audrey Lewis of class 11A is the Assistant House Captain of Winners House. Mohammed Fazil of 12C is the Achievers House Captain and Ashton Aflos of 11C is the Assistant Captain of Achievers House.

The prefects were also reminded of their moral obligations and duties. Dr V Binumon Principal and Senior Administrator ICSK Senior, administered the oath to the Core Senate members and Prefects and also shared a very intense message with them. He said that one must accept the challenges in one's life as it is the challenge that would make them strong to overcome any hindrances in their lives. As a symbolic gesture the symbolic office badges were invested upon the office bearers for the current year. This was indeed a proud moment for the children as the badges were invested upon them by their parents.

The Chief Guest for the occasion Lieutenant Colonel Sir Jason Belknap the Army Attache, Embassy of USA also addressed the gathering. He enthralled the children and teachers with his words of



wisdom. He made the children understand the importance and value of being a good leader. He also advised the children that only a good leader can be a responsible and dutiful citizen in life. He interacted with the children through the virtual facility. It was indeed a moment for the ICSKians to cherish. A token of gratitude was shared and presented to the Chief Guest by the entire fraternity of ICSK. To add to the beauty of the occasion, an inspirational song was rendered by Team Swaranjali, the ICSK Senior musical band.

The prestigious and staggering virtual investiture ceremony came to an end with the proposing of vote of thanks by Susan Rajesh Vice Principal ICSK Senior wherein she shared the three magical words, "DREAM, DARE AND DRIVE". The program was wound up with the Indian National anthem sung by Swaranjali.

As the prevailing situation is quite known to all, COVID-19 the pandemic crisis that has brought the entire world to a standstill, our children's education and future is quite a disturbing matter to pon-

der over. The Indian Community School Kuwait has always been considerate about its children and their future. As an initiative towards setting a platform for the children to carry forward their education and to keep them regenerated, proactive, zealous and compassionate towards studies even during this period of plight, ICSK acted online classes for the children to keep them high in their thoughts and minds. A lot of other activities are lined up in the pipeline exclusively for the children so that they do not lose their flow or track. As the conception of the same, the school organized a very distinctive virtual investiture ceremony which was the first of its kind in the entire middle-east. The initial procedures were carried forward wherein online nominations of the candidates were given and online campaigning was also done by the candidates. A very democratic system of online elections were conducted in which the children casted their votes wisely and the best candidate was chosen for all categories.



Local

Interior Minister inspects COVID-19 countermeasures in northern Kuwait

Fire Directorate chief visits teams at quarantine sites



KUWAIT: Deputy Premier and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh visits Al-Retqa station north of Kuwait.

By Hanan Al-Saadoun

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Deputy Premier and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh and Interior Ministry Undersecretary Lt Gen Essam Al-Nahham visited Al-Retqa station, northern Kuwait, on Sunday. Saleh, also Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, also made the visit to follow up efforts to confront the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), and to show support for security forces working in frontlines during Eid Al-Fitr holiday, the MoI said in a statement.

Saleh conveyed to the security forces appreciation of Kuwait's leadership for their relentless effort to maintain security and order, said the statement. Saleh was briefed about the new radar system and border guards' operations during the pandemic, and their management of quarantine facilities and shelters. He was also briefed about their isolation of Mahboula, and deployment in Sabah Al-Ahmad and Wafra, said the ministry. Border guards explained to Saleh how they were monitoring borders and cracking down on smuggling attempts.

Separately, Director General of Kuwait's Fire

Service Directorate (KFSD) Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mekrad inspected on Sunday firemen tasked with securing a quarantine site in Al-Ardiya and another in Al-Zour, approximately 100 kilometers south of Kuwait City. The quarantine site in Al-Ardiya is affiliated with the Ministry of Public Works and the other with Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC).

KFSD said in a statement Lt Gen Mekrad conveyed Eid Al-Fitr greetings from Minister Saleh to the firemen. The minister praised their efforts and sacrifices, serving quarantined people under extraordinary circumstances. Lt Gen Mekrad was briefed about an emergency plan and back-up centers that provide support to the squad in accidents.

At the quarantine site in Al-Zour, he was informed in details by the fire brigade chief in Al-Ahmadi district, Col Ahmad Al-Bairmi. The fire brigade chief, who voiced satisfaction at full preparedness at the quarantines, was accompanied during the tour by the deputy director of the combat sector, Maj Gen Jamal Al-Blaihees and the director of public relations and media, Brig Khalil Al-Amir.



Deputy Premier and Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh meets with Interior Ministry personnel during his visit to Al-Retqa station.



Director General of Kuwait's Fire Service Directorate Lt Gen Khaled Al-Mekrad visits firemen tasked with securing quarantine sites in Al-Ardiya and Al-Zour.



Supporting forces at frontlines

Planes carrying medical supplies to return from China

KUWAIT: Three Kuwaiti aircraft departed from China's Quanzhou International Airport Tuesday to ship out medical supplies to Kuwait as part of air bridge between the two countries. In a statement to the press, Kuwait's Ambassador to China Sameeh Hayat affirmed that there are three other planes scheduled to provide the country with medical supplies to enhance its strategic stock

during this weekend. Ambassador Hayat also pointed out that there were other shipments of medical and preventive supplies that were launched last week from China towards the country by sea shipping from the most important Chinese international ports in the cities of Shanghai and Tianjin and that they would arrive in Kuwait soon. The Ambassador expressed Kuwait's appreciation for the continuous efforts in which the leaders of the Chinese government, especially in the foreign and trade ministries and the Central Customs Authority, providing permanent support, facilitating all procedures, and overcoming difficulties and obstacles in front of the Kuwaiti embassy in Beijing to support efforts for containing and combating the coronavirus. —KUNA

IICO hands over material to Sudan to deal with COVID-19



KHARTOUM: Kuwait-based International Islamic Charitable Organization (IICO) recently handed over to the Sudanese authorities material to be used by health care workers dealing with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Ahmad Al-Sanousi, head of IICO Office in Sudan, said that the IICO handed over personal protective equipment for the health care workers working in quarantine facilities in Khartoum. He added the materials included 320 PPEs, 500 gear units for surgeons and 40 boxes of face masks. —KUNA

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Hong Kong police fire pepper pellets to disperse protesters

Confusion, jitters as Indian domestic flights resume

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DUBAI: An ICBA scientist helps a farm-owner in the Al Wagan area near Al-Ain, UAE. — Reuters photos

UAE's high-tech food plan pays off

Part of a broader push to produce more home-grown food

ABU DHABI: In the past four years, the United Arab Emirates has grown a small but rising share of its own organic tomatoes, aiming to shore up food security in an import-dependent desert country. The effort - part of a broader push to produce more home-grown food amid fears climate change could trigger instability in the global food trade - started after the country was hit by food export bans during the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Today, the move to build up food resilience is paying off early in the face of another crisis: the coronavirus pandemic.

When the United Arab Emirates (UAE) went into lockdown in April to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, residents had the same reaction as millions of others around the world - they started panic-buying. The instinct to stock up made sense in a country where more than 80% of food is imported, said Ismahane Elouafi, director general of the International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA). Nonetheless supermarket shelves have remained fully stocked, partly because the UAE has long had policies in place to ensure an uninterrupted supply of food from abroad, she noted.

But in the face of the pandemic, the UAE's confidence that it will continue to have enough food is bolstered by its success in growing its own, using innovations like vertical farming and climate-resilient

crops, she added. "Thanks to the work being done to harness the benefits of innovation, agriculture is becoming possible and profitable in a country with harsh climatic conditions," Elouafi said. According to data from the World Bank, the contribution of agriculture to the country's gross domestic product rose from \$2.39 billion in 2012 to \$3.06 billion in 2018. The UAE's Ministry of Food Security declined to re-

launched in 2018, but had already been woven into government policy for several years before - the country has worked to boost domestic food production.

It has built infrastructure, including complexes for cattle-breeding - and introduced financial measures, from exempting value-added tax on food produced on local farms to paying subsidies on fodder. But traditional farming methods can only go so far in a country with limited supplies of fresh water and arable land. Last year, the World Resources Institute classified the UAE as under "extremely high water stress", meaning more than 80% of available surface and groundwater supply is withdrawn on average every year.

The bulk of that water is used by the agricultural sector. Combined with a warming climate and a growing population, this is causing available groundwater levels to drop by 0.5 cm (0.2 inches) per year. To meet the country's freshwater needs, the government is increasingly turning to energy-intensive desalination methods. Another challenge is that less than 1% of the UAE's land is arable, according to the World Bank. The focus is on finding ways to farm with fewer resources - which is where technology and experimenting with new crops can help, said Sajid Maqsood, associate professor in the College of Food and Agriculture at United Arab Emirates University. "Urban and vertical farming has to be an important



Climate change could trigger instability

spond to a request for comment.

Farming with fewer resources

Currently ranking 21 out of 113 countries on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Food Security Index, the UAE aims to be in the top 10 by 2021 and number one by mid-century. By then, the federal government hopes half the food Emiratis consume will be produced locally, compared to 20% today. Under the UAE's National Food Security Strategy - which was officially



DUBAI: Quinoa seedlings are pictured at ICBA headquarters in Dubai, UAE.

part of the strategy," he said by phone.

Year-round fruit & veg

Farming in the UAE has been moving in a high-tech direction over the past decade. In 2009, for example, the Middle Eastern country had 50 hydroponic farms, where plants are grown without soil using nutrient-infused water. Today, it has more than 1,000, according to the ICBA. Most of the farming innovations gaining ground in the UAE involve growing crops indoors, in an attempt to tackle one of the main challenges facing the region's farmers: the cli-

mate. Global warming is expected to lead to less rainfall, fiercer droughts, higher sea levels and more storms in the UAE over the next 70 years, a group of climate experts said in a 2019 paper. By 2050 the country's average temperature will increase by about 2.5 degrees Celsius (4.5 degrees Fahrenheit), they noted. "At least four months of the year are not conducive to traditional agriculture - heat, humidity and dust are challenges to farming in the region," explained Digant Raj Kapoor, people manager at Madar Farms, a local agriculture tech company. — Reuters

In morgues and shipping containers, Ecuadorians search for lost dead

GUAYAQUIL: Dolores Centeno has scoured the morgues and cemeteries of Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city, for two months searching for her father's body. Now, in a desperate last attempt to find him, she hopes to catch a glimpse of a scar on his chest that would set him apart from the dozens of other decomposing corpses in a newly-filled shipping container. Like other families looking for their loved ones in the coastal city ravaged by the coronavirus, Centeno is praying the body of her 63-year-old father is among the more than 130 bodies that authorities say they are holding in such containers, awaiting identification. Guayaquil in March and April faced a brutal outbreak of the virus that left bodies piling up in overwhelmed hospitals and corpses sitting for days in houses before authorities came to retrieve them, as morgues overflowed.

The government established a task force to collect cadavers and deployed the containers to store the mounting bodies. But the chaos gave way to disorganization. Bodies were lost or misidentified, resulting in families looking for loved ones in morgues, hospitals and now, shipping containers, across the city. Experts have so far identified 64 corpses through fingerprint recognition. They are also relying on family identification and more time-intensive genetic testing, according to Mario Corrales, the head of Ecuador's Forensic Sciences Criminalistics Laboratory.

Centeno's father passed away in late March, hours after being admitted to one of the city's public hospitals with respiratory problems. There was no paper trail to identify what

happened to him after he was admitted, said Centeno. Forensic experts asked Centeno if her father had any identifying scars, Centeno said. "He had two, the largest from an open heart operation and the other from hernia surgery." Interior Minister Maria Paula Romo told reporters on Monday that the government was working with a team of forensic doctors and scientists to identify the bodies "and to be able to give an answer to every last family that went through this unfortunate situation."

"Every day progress is made on this issue, little by little," she said. Ecuador has officially reported over 37,000 coronavirus cases and more than 3,000 deaths, but authorities acknowledge both figures are likely significant underestimates due to a lack of testing. Jorge Wated, the head of the task force responsible for collecting the deceased, said on Twitter on May 2 there were over 8,200 more deaths than would normally be projected in the province of Guayas, where Guayaquil is located, during April alone. Wated did not respond to a request for comment for this story. Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno dissolved the task force in early May as the death toll stabilized.

Investigation

The country's attorney general has since launched an investigation into three public hospitals in Guayaquil over allegations that they did not follow protocol for identifying bodies, while the government has set up a website where people can search for deceased family members. If a patient was registered by authorities, the location of their remains is recorded on the site. But many Ecuadorians still have no answers. "I looked for her in a container and I did not find her; I looked for her in the cemetery, I did not find her there either, she is not on any list," said Victor Hugo Orellana, who is looking for the body of his 72-year-old mother, whose body he said he released to the government in March to be buried. Her remains have since gone missing. The Health Ministry and hospitals under investigation did not respond to request for comment. The Ombudsman's Office asked a local judge to award reparations to the families of the deceased and to speed up the identification process. — Reuters

Saudi to end virus curfew next month

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia said Tuesday it will end its nationwide coronavirus curfew from June 21, except in the holy city of Makkah, after more than two months of stringent curbs. Prayers will also be allowed to resume in all mosques outside Makkah from May 31, the interior ministry said in a series of measures announced on state media. Elsewhere in the Gulf, Kuwait and the emirate of Dubai also moved to ease their lockdown measures, which together with a collapse in oil prices have pushed the region into its worst economic crisis in decades. Saudi Arabia, which has reported the highest number of coronavirus cases in the Gulf, imposed a full nationwide curfew during Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday that marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan.

The ministry said it will begin easing restrictions in a phased manner this week, with the curfew relaxed between 6 am and 3 pm between Thursday and Saturday. From Sunday until June 20, the curfew will be further eased until 8 pm, the ministry added. The kingdom will lift the lockdown entirely from June 21. "Starting from Thursday, the kingdom will enter a new phase (in dealing with the pandemic) and will gradually return to normal based on the rules of social distancing," Health Minister Tawfiq Al-Rabiah said on Monday. Saudi Arabia has reported around 75,000 coronavirus infections and some 400 deaths

from COVID-19.

In the United Arab Emirates, which has reported more than 30,000 cases and 248 deaths, authorities in Dubai moved to lift restrictions on businesses and shorten a nighttime curfew yesterday after the Eid holiday. Officials said late Monday that retail stores, gyms, cinemas and attractions like the dolphinarium will be allowed to reopen under social distancing and disinfection rules. Kuwait, which has reported some 22,000 cases and 165 deaths, also said that it would end its total curfew this weekend, with reduced measures to be announced later.

Questions over hajj

Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites, in March suspended the year-round "umrah" pilgrimage over fears of the disease spreading in the holy cities of Makkah and Medina. That suspension will remain in place, the interior ministry said. Authorities are yet to announce whether they will proceed with this year's hajj - scheduled for late July - but they have urged Muslims to temporarily defer preparations for the annual pilgrimage.

Last year, some 2.5 million faithful travelled to Saudi Arabia from around the world to participate in the hajj, which Muslims are obliged to perform at least once during their lifetime. Makkah's Grand Mosque has been almost devoid of worshippers since March, with an eerie emptiness surrounding the sacred Kaaba - the large cube-shaped structure towards which Muslims around the world pray. But on Sunday, the first day of Eid, prayers went ahead and an imam stood on a podium while Saudi security forces, some wearing masks, positioned themselves between rows of worshippers - their prayer mats placed in well-spaced arcs. — AFP

International

Trump, Biden turn to a new campaign field - Snapchat

Photo-sending app, a new battlefield for opponents

WASHINGTON: Gone are the lively meetings, the distribution of flyers on busy campuses. The coronavirus pandemic has put an abrupt stop to traditional US political means of courting young voters - forcing presidential candidates to turn to Snapchat instead. The photo-sending app that boasts 229 million users - better known for filters that turn your face into a puppy or a vampire - is a new battlefield for opponents. The photo-sending app that boasts 229 million users - better known for filters that turn your face into a puppy or a vampire - is a new battlefield for opponents. The photo-sending app that boasts 229 million users - better known for filters that turn your face into a puppy or a vampire - is a new battlefield for opponents.

The stakes are high: Gen Z (ages 18-23) and millennials (ages 24-39) together make up more than 35 percent of the American voting population. For them, traditional forms of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, are increasingly growing passe. In the race to win them over, Trump's reelection team boasts a solid lead, nor have they suffered from lockdowns to slow the spread of COVID-19.

"The President's campaign has always prioritized digital tools and data infrastructure, so it was a very natural shift to 100 percent digital campaigning," Ken Farnaso, the Trump campaign deputy press secretary, told AFP. The 100-person strong team is also backing a candidate who is infamous for his own prolific social media use. "It's clear that we're wiping the floor with Biden's campaign," Farnaso said. As a result, the number of subscribers to Trump's Snapchat account tripled in eight months, easily reaching 1.5 million. Biden's team declined to share its number of Snapchat subscribers.

Aviator filter

"I'm sure we can do better on the internet," Biden

himself admitted during an interview shared on Snapchat two weeks ago, from his home in Delaware. He had been sheltering there until Monday, when he made his first public appearance in months for a Memorial Day ceremony, sporting a black face mask. "The fact is, we're trying," he said.

His team has refused to provide details on its arsenal but insists that it has been working twice as hard on digital campaigning since the start of the pandemic. Top staffers for his former rivals Elizabeth Warren, Beto O'Rourke and Kamala Harris have also been recruited to beef up the ranks. On his Snapchat profile, the former number two to President Barack Obama keeps it cool: he is shown without a tie but with his signature aviator sunglasses. Followers can try on the same pair thanks to a custom campaign filter.

Subscribers to Trump's account, meanwhile, are invited to relive one of the president's rallies in Wisconsin, a state crucial to winning the election on November 3. Trump's team also posts videos openly mocking his opponents' gaffes on Snapchat that are then shared on a massive scale. If Snapchat - whose initial premise was sending self-deleting photos - is popular among the candidates, it is also because the platform has expressed a desire to independently and actively participate in American political life.

"Snapchat believes that there is no more powerful form of self-expression than helping its users engage in democracy and exercise their right to vote," a spokesperson told AFP. The app, according to the spokesperson, reaches 75 percent of Gen Z-ers and millennials on a daily basis - a figure it intends to take



WASHINGTON: Invited guests listen as US President Donald Trump speaks during an event in the Rose Garden at the White House on May 26, 2020 in Washington, DC. — AFP

advantage of. The platform had already inspired 450,000 young people to register to vote for the mid-term elections in 2018, and it plans on developing new in-app features as the election approaches.

Recently, Snapchat began offering users voter registration links during the week following their 18th birthday. Between 300,000 and 500,000 Snapchat turn 18 per month. Conversely, its competitor TikTok,

owned by Chinese company ByteDance, has opted to stick with the app's traditionally light-hearted aesthetic. But that doesn't stop political content from flourishing on the platform. A video of a man in a hot-dog costume listing all the reasons why he thought Biden - whose campaign has been rocked by a sexual assault accusation - was a "pervert" has racked up more than 530,000 likes on TikTok. — AFP

Germany's choirs silenced as singing branded virus risk

BERLIN: When the Berlin Cathedral Choir gathered for a rehearsal on March 9, the new coronavirus was still a distant concern, with fewer than 50 confirmed cases in the German capital. But five days later, one of the ensemble's 80 singers contacted choir director Tobias Brommann to say she had tested positive for COVID-19.

Within two weeks, around 30 members had tested positive and a further 30 were showing symptoms - including Brommann himself, who was struck down with a headache, cough and fever. "We also can't be sure if those without symptoms were not infected too, as we have not done antibody tests," Brommann told AFP. Hardly considered an extreme activity up to now, singing - especially choral singing - is quickly earning a reputation in the pandemic as about the most dangerous thing you can do. Similar horror stories have emerged from choirs around the world, including one in Amsterdam where 102 singers are reported to have fallen sick with COVID-19.

High-risk activity

Though much is not yet understood about how the new coronavirus spreads, anecdotal evidence has been enough to convince German authorities that singing is a particularly high-risk activity. Under new freedoms being gradually introduced across the country's states, Germans can meet friends in the park, dine in a restaurant, play sports, go to church, browse the shops, watch football and even go swimming.

But singing remains broadly off limits, and it looks likely to stay that way for the foreseeable future. In recommendations for the resumption of church services published in April, the federal government stated that singing should be avoided "because of the increased

production of potentially infectious droplets, which can be spread over greater distances". Several states have heeded the advice and banned singing from services. Even Germany's revered Robert Koch Institute (RKI) disease control centre has warned against singing, with RKI head Lothar Wieler saying that "droplets fly particularly far when singing".

Infectious particles

The fears are partly based on the fact that when singing, as Brommann points out, "you inhale and exhale very deeply, so if there are virus particles floating in the air then they can get into the lungs relatively quickly". But there is also evidence to suggest that singing produces especially high numbers of potentially infectious micro-particles. According to a study published in the Nature journal in 2019, saying "aah" for 30 seconds produces twice as many such particles as 30 seconds of continuous coughing.

Indeed, many choirs fear their future looks bleak. Five German boys' choirs have written to the government saying their existence is under threat and demanding action to save them from ruin. At the Church of the Twelve Apostles in Berlin's Schoeneberg district, there have been no choir rehearsals since early March. Soprano Heike Benda-Blank, 59, has been singing there for 10 years. "I do miss it," she said. "You can still sing in the shower but it's not the same." Some research has given cause for optimism. The Bundeswehr University in Munich published a study in early May showing that singing only disturbs air flow up to half a meter (1.6 feet) in front of the person.

Freiburg University's Institute for Performing Arts Medicine has also published guidelines for singing partly based on a study it carried out in the southern city of Bamberg with similar results. However, institute head Bernhard Richter warns: "Contrary to what was sometimes reported, we did not make any aerosol measurements" - tiny particles that have the potential to circulate much further in a room. The institute published updated guidelines this week that include limiting the number of people in the room and the length of rehearsals, staying two meters apart, keeping rooms ventilated, screening choir members and wearing masks.

"This is a work in progress," Richter said. "Of course

scribe hydroxychloroquine or a related drug, chloroquine, from the onset of COVID-19 symptoms. It said Monday it stood by that guideline, despite the WHO ending clinical trials of hydroxychloroquine over concerns about its safety and effectiveness against the coronavirus.

Gov residence raided

Meanwhile, Brazilian police raided the Rio de Janeiro state governor's official residence Tuesday as part of an investigation into the alleged embezzlement of funds to build field hospitals for coronavirus patients. Governor Wilson Witzel, however, condemned the raid as "political persecution" by President Jair Bolsonaro's government. Federal police also raided Witzel's former home and several other targets in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, on suspicion that a "corrupt network... embezzled public funds allocated to respond to the public health emergency caused by the coronavirus," they said in a statement. Of the nine field hospitals that were supposed to be built to avoid the collapse of the Rio state health system, just three have been completed so far. Witzel denied wrongdoing.

The governor, who has clashed with Bolsonaro repeatedly - including over the president's dislike of the coronavirus stay-at-home measures he has implemented - said he was being targeted for political reasons. Bolsonaro, who has downplayed the virus, regularly lashes out at state governors' stay-at-home policies, saying they are needlessly hurting the economy. "What happened to me is going to happen to other governors who are considered enemies," Witzel told a news conference. "I'm not going to hang my head... and I won't stop fighting against this fascism, this new dictatorship of persecution in our country."

Speaking outside the presidential palace, Bolsonaro sent his "congratulations to the federal police" for the raid, with a smile. The politically charged case comes as the number of coronavirus infections has exploded in Brazil. The country of 210 million people now has the



DORTMUND: People walk past shops on a pedestrian street in Dortmund in Dortmund, western Germany during the novel coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

singers want clear statements, black and white, but then you have to say, maybe we don't know yet." In proposals to the authorities, Germany's Catholic Church has endorsed "quiet singing" in services, as well as restricting numbers and requiring people to stand 1.5 metres apart, though the Protestant Church continues to advise a complete ban. But the potential dangers of singing became clear once again this month after a virus outbreak at a church service in Frankfurt - where the congregation had been singing and not wearing masks. At least 40 people were infected at the service, with 112 affected overall.

It remains to be seen whether singing can be controlled at other events in Germany, such as Bundesliga football matches, which are being played behind closed doors until further notice. Singing could also potentially spread the virus at large events such as rock concerts and the Oktoberfest beer festival, where rowdy singing is an integral of the proceedings - undoubtedly one of the reasons it has been cancelled for 2020. A spokesman for the interior ministry told AFP that since all major events are banned until at least August 31 in Germany anyway, this remains a "hypothetical question". "It depends on how the infection situation develops," he said. — AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: Aerial view showing the Pavao-Pavaozinho favela surrounded by the neighborhoods of Copacabana, Ipanema and Lagoa in Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil during the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

second-highest caseload in the world, after the United States, and has registered more than 23,000 deaths from COVID-19. Experts say under-testing means the real figure is probably far higher. Witzel, who was himself diagnosed with COVID-19 last month, was a Bolsonaro ally during the latter's 2018 presidential campaign.

But the pair had a falling out, and Witzel has now emerged as a potential rival when Bolsonaro seeks reelection in 2022. Bolsonaro recently called Witzel a "pile of manure" during a cabinet meeting. The video of that meeting became public when it got swept up in a separate investigation into allegations that Bolsonaro obstructed justice to protect his inner circle from federal police probes. Investigators are looking at whether Bolsonaro improperly fired or pressured the justice minister, federal police chief and head of the federal police in Rio, all three of whom recently lost their jobs. — Agencies

Canada army reports horrific conditions in nursing homes

OTTAWA: Conditions at Ontario nursing homes hard-hit by COVID-19 outbreaks, as described by Canadian soldiers helping out there, are "deeply disturbing," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Tuesday. The Canadian military deployed troops at the height of the pandemic in April to five elderly care homes in the nation's most populous province to fill severe staffing shortages.

In a report they said they found blatant disregard for infection control measures and "horrible" care of seniors that verged on abusive. The soldiers said that among other forms of mistreatment, residents had been "left in beds soiled in diapers," crying for help and forcefully fed, causing choking. "It is deeply disturbing," Trudeau told a daily briefing. After reading the report, he said: "I had obviously a range of emotions of anger, of sadness, of frustration, of grief." "We need to do a better job of supporting our seniors in long-term care right across the country, through this pandemic and beyond," he said.

"The greatest generation saw us through World War Two. We need to be there to support them properly through this global crisis." The military report said that, in one extreme case, a patient was believed to have choked to death while being fed lying down. Attempts to revive him failed. Soldiers said they found "significant fecal contamination in numerous patient rooms" and dirty diapers often leading to "skin breakdown." Medical charts were inaccurate and families were given wrong information. Residents who tested positive for the coronavirus were allowed to roam around their respective care homes, risking infecting others.

Nurses and support workers were also observed not changing their masks and other personal protective equipment for several hours as they moved between patient rooms. Elderly care homes have accounted for about 80 percent of all COVID-19 deaths in Canada, which topped 6,700 on Tuesday. Nearly 300 army doctors and nurses were sent to work in the Ontario care homes. — AFP

'Stop partying', police warn Hollywood Hills neighborhood

LOS ANGELES: Authorities in Los Angeles have warned residents of the city's Hollywood Hills neighborhood to tone down their house parties which have become a major problem during the global coronavirus pandemic. The issue has become so bad that police and the prosecutor's office released a video on Tuesday warning that action will be taken to deal with the large gatherings, which are prohibited under the city's Safer at Home orders issued in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The three officers who spoke in the video said the parties have become "a major concern" because of loud music, "loud screaming voices ... at 3 a.m." and traffic congestion in narrow streets. "Public intoxication as well as urination is also an issue that we've seen," one officer says in the video. "If you can avoid these situations, you can avoid a visit from your local police agency in the middle of the night."

Another police officer urged residents in the swanky hillside neighborhood - where many luxury estates are used for short-term rentals - to call police in the event the partying continues and to take photos and videos to share with authorities. "If police are called to a location of a party, there will be consequences," warned Ethan Weaver, prosecutor for the Hollywood division of the city attorney's office. He said homeowners can receive a citation or face criminal prosecution which can land them in jail for up to six months, even if they are not present.

Hollywood Station Captain Steve Lurie told the Los Angeles Times that last week they received 49 calls about parties, 15 to 20 percent more than normal for a holiday weekend. — AFP

Brazil leads daily COVID deaths for fifth straight day

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil reported the highest daily COVID-19 death toll in the world Tuesday with 1,039 people killed, the fifth straight day the country has topped the list. Latin America's largest country, which has emerged as a new epicenter in the coronavirus pandemic, has seen its daily death toll surge past that of the United States, the hardest-hit country so far. The US recorded a death toll of 657 in the past 24 hours, said the Johns Hopkins University tracker. That was the third day in a row it had come in under 700, bringing the country's overall toll to 98,875 deaths.

Meanwhile, Brazil's daily death toll has passed 1,000 four times since the pandemic accelerated in the country a week ago. Brazil has now conferred a total of 24,512 deaths, according to health ministry figures. Experts say under-testing means the real number is probably much higher. With a population of 210 million people, Brazil has recorded 391,222 infections, second only to the US, which has confirmed more than 1.68 million. Brazil is torn over how to respond to the pandemic. Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has downplayed the virus and railed against stay-at-home measures, arguing the economic fallout risks causing more damage than the virus itself.

But most state governments have stuck to the World Health Organization's guidance and closed non-essential businesses. Bolsonaro has meanwhile pinned his hopes on the medication hydroxychloroquine, which - like US President Donald Trump - he has touted as a potential wonder drug against COVID-19. Brazil's health ministry recommends doctors in the public health system pre-

International

Hong Kong police fire pepper pellets to disperse protests over security bill

National Anthem bill carries 3 yrs jail, HK\$50,000 fine

HONG KONG: Hong Kong riot police fired pepper pellets to disperse protesters in the heart of the global financial centre yesterday, as new national security laws proposed by Beijing revived anti-government demonstrations. Police also surrounded the Legislative Council where a bill was due to be debated that would criminalize disrespect of the Chinese anthem, amid soaring tensions over perceived threats to the semi-autonomous city's freedoms.

People of all ages took to the streets, some dressed in black, some wearing office clothes, and some hiding their identities with open umbrellas in scenes reminiscent of the unrest that shook the city last year. "Although you're afraid inside your heart, you need to speak out," said Chang, 29, a clerk and protester dressed in black with a helmet respirator and goggles in her backpack. A call to gather around the Legislative Council was scrapped due to a heavy presence of riot police. Many shops, bank branches and office buildings closed early. Dozens of people were seen rounded up by riot police and made to sit on a sidewalk.

Protesters have returned to the streets of Chinese-ruled Hong Kong after Beijing proposed national security laws aimed at tackling secession, subversion and terrorist activities. The planned laws could see Chinese intelligence agencies set up bases in the semi-autonomous city. The move triggered the first big street unrest in Hong Kong in months on Sunday, with police firing tear gas and water cannon to disperse protesters. The United States, Australia, Britain, Canada and others

have expressed concerns about the legislation, widely seen as a potential turning point for China's freest city and one of the world's leading financial hubs.

Police said they had arrested at least 16 people yesterday, aged 14-40, for alleged crimes including possession of offensive weapons, possession of tools for illegal use and dangerous driving. Protesters in a downtown shopping mall chanted "Liberate Hong Kong! Revolution of our times" and "Hong Kong independence, the only way out", but dispersed as lookouts shouted a warning to "go shopping!" at the sight of police vans outside. One protester was seen with a placard reading "one country, two systems is a lie", referring to the political system put in place at Britain's 1997 handover of the city to China that is meant to guarantee Hong Kong's freedoms until at least 2047.

"I'm scared ... if you don't come out today, you'll never be able to come out. This is legislation that directly affects us," said Ryan Tsang, a hotel manager. Chinese authorities and the Beijing-backed government in Hong Kong say there is no threat to the city's high degree of autonomy and the new security laws will be tightly focused. "It's for the long-term stability of Hong Kong and China, it won't affect the freedom of assembly and speech and it won't affect the city's status as a financial centre," Hong Kong Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung told reporters. "It would provide a stable environment for businesses."

Hong Kong's most prominent tycoon, Li Ka-shing, said in a statement security laws were within every nation's right, but Hong Kong had the "mission-critical task" to maintain



HONG KONG: Hong Kong riot police (left) issue a warning as they plan to clear away people who gathered in the Central district of downtown Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

trust in "one country, two systems". Hong Kong media reported Beijing had expanded the scope of the draft security legislation to include organizations as well as individuals. The law was being revised to cover not just behavior or acts that endanger national security, but also activities, broadcaster RTHK and the South China Morning Post reported. US President Donald Trump on Tuesday said the United States this week would announce a strong response to the planned security legislation for Hong Kong.

Hong Kong shares slide

The US-China Business Council (USCBC) urged "all leaders to take those steps necessary to de-escalate tensions, promote economic recovery and the rule of law, and preserve the 'one country, two systems' principle."

Asian shares slipped over rising tensions between the United States and China. Hong Kong shares led declines with the Hang Seng falling 0.46%, though it kept a bit of distance from a two-month low touched on Monday. Protesters and pro-democracy politicians say Hong Kong's National Anthem Bill, which aims to govern the use and playing of the Chinese national anthem, represents another sign of what they see as accelerating interference from Beijing.

The bill carries penalties of up to three years jail and/or fines of up to HK\$50,000 (\$6,450) for those who insult the anthem. It also orders that primary and secondary school students in Hong Kong be taught to sing the "March of the Volunteers", along with its history and etiquette. — Reuters

Protesters chant 'Liberate Hong Kong'



India backs use of HCQ

NEW DELHI: India's top biomedical research body on Tuesday backed the use of the anti-malarial hydroxychloroquine as a preventative against coronavirus, after the WHO suspended clinical trials of the drug over safety concerns. The endorsement from the Indian Council of Medical Research came a week after US President Donald Trump said he was taking the drug as a preventative measure.

Observational and case control studies in India showed there were "no major side effects" of taking the drug as a prophylactic, ICMR Director-General Balram Bhargava said. Cases of nausea, vomiting and heart palpitations were noted, he added. Last week, the ICMR - which is leading the government's response to the virus - expanded its advisory for the use of hydroxychloroquine as a preventative measure. The body said all healthcare workers in hospitals and some frontline personnel could now take the drug for up to several weeks under strict medical supervision.

"We recommended that for prophylaxis, it should be continued, because there is no harm. Benefit may be there," Bhargava told reporters. Bhargava added that when the ICMR weighed the risks and benefits of the drug, it decided that "we should not deny it to our frontline workers and healthcare work-

ers." But he stressed that personal protective gear should still be worn. The previous ICMR guidelines for hydroxychloroquine stated that only asymptomatic healthcare workers caring for suspected or confirmed patients, or household contacts of confirmed patients, could be given the drug.

On Monday, the WHO said it was halting testing of the drug as a COVID-19 treatment after studies questioned its safety, including one that found it actually increased the risk of death. Under India's clinical guidelines for coronavirus treatment, hydroxychloroquine can be administered, but only to patients "with severe disease and requiring ICU management". India - which accounts for 70 percent of global production of hydroxychloroquine - on Tuesday reported 145,380 cases of the virus including 4,167 deaths. The country ramped up output of the drug amid increased demand, after Trump pushed for hydroxychloroquine as a potential shield or treatment for the virus.

Meanwhile, a member of its scientific committee said Algeria will continue to use the drug hydroxychloroquine against the novel coronavirus, despite the World Health Organization suspending clinical trials of such treatments. "We've treated thousands of cases with this medicine, very successfully so far," said Mohamed Bekkat, a member of the scientific committee on the North African country's Covid-19 outbreak. "We haven't noted any undesirable reactions," he told AFP. — Agencies

Maid spotlights India inequality

LONDON: A computer game where players morph into housemaid in India who tries to dodge the new coronavirus and feed her family has opened people's eyes to inequality, one of its creators said on Tuesday. The "Survive COVID" game brings to life the pandemic's impact on poor families in India as the character tries to avoid infection while she keeps the household fed and safe, with no savings or running water to follow handwashing guidelines. "We have heard back from several hundreds of people that it has been a real eye-opener," said Vedika Agarwal, head of Chennai-based non-profit organization Yein Udaan, which created the game together with technology firm XR Labs.

"They make a large part of India's workforce and population so we can't just turn a blind eye ... not just because of our reliance on them but because they are also people who are a part of our society and our country - they need to be looked after." Millions of workers already living a marginal existence were left facing starvation under a lockdown introduced by India's government in March, amid lags in promised government aid. Agarwal said she hoped growing awareness of the devastating impact of COVID-19 on India's poor and their lack of security would

create a push to build a fairer society in the wake of the pandemic.

"Their plight has been highlighted and it's in people's faces, so the government can use this as an opportunity to restructure and re-implement its policies and law," she told said. Since its release a month ago, more than 150,000 players around the world have been put into the shoes of a housemaid fighting to buy food each day, manage her exposure to the coronavirus without income, savings or proper sanitation. They lose if they run out of money or if their COVID risk reaches 100%. The game has also attracted interest globally, said Agarwal, with community leaders from Brazil to Kenya getting in touch to say that the challenges shown in the game mirrored those faced by the poor in their countries.

India has extended its nationwide lockdown to May 31, with almost 150,000 cases and more than 4,000 deaths, with infections rising in states witnessing millions of migrant laborers returning from the big cities. The families who inspired the games are still suffering, Agarwal said, amid continuing uncertainty and discrimination. But investment by governments to help prevent the spread of the disease and re-start economies offers a chance to increase equality at a time when the issue is at the forefront of minds and shown how communities are connected, she added. "The lockdown has proved that a lot of us rely on these individuals and their labour," she said. — Reuters

Crash landing: Virus hits global air transport hard

PARIS: The COVID-19 pandemic has battered the air transport sector by all but grounding planes, resulting in layoffs, bankruptcies and rescue plans. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has estimated global airlines will lose \$314 billion (286 billion euros) in 2020 revenues. That's a 55 percent dive compared to 2019, and air traffic will not bounce back to where it stood before the virus until 2023, the IATA says. Here's a recap of some of the major casualties.

Gone under

Latin America's largest airline LATAM, which has more than 42,000 employees, became the latest carrier to file for bankruptcy on Tuesday. It entered into a voluntary reorganization under Chapter 11 protection in the United States, which allows a company that is no longer able to repay its debt to restructure without pressure from creditors. This comes just two weeks after Colombia's Avianca, which has 20,000 staff, also filed for bankruptcy in the US to reorganize its debt. Cash-strapped giant Virgin Australia also collapsed on April 21, going into administration. The airline had appealed for a Aus\$1.4 billion (\$930 million) loan to stay afloat, but the government refused to bail out the majority foreign-owned company. The pandemic has also led to the collapse of South Africa's Comair and South African Airways (SAA), Britain's Flybe and four subsidiaries of Norwegian Air



MUNICH: A technician of the German airline Lufthansa works at a parked plane at the 'Franz-Josef-Strauss' airport in Munich, southern Germany. A rescue program for the coronavirus-stricken airline giant Lufthansa has been reached according to Lufthansa. — AFP

Shuttle in Sweden and Denmark.

Jobs slashed

Air Canada plans to lay off more than half of its workforce, or at least 19,000 employees. British Airways will shed 12,000 jobs or 30 percent of its workforce. US Delta Air Lines will carry out 10,000 redundancies (11 percent), while Scandinavia's SAS will lay off 5,000 jobs (40 percent). Other job losses will come at United Airlines in the US (3,450 officials), Britain's Virgin Atlantic (3,150), Ireland's Ryanair (3,000) and Aer Lingus (900), Icelandair (2,000), Brussels Airlines (1,000), Hungary's Wizz Air (1,000) and Fiji Airways (758). The damage to the air sector extends beyond the airlines. US plane manufacturer

Boeing has announced 16,000 layoffs, or 10 percent of its workforce in the civil aviation sector. In the engine sector, US manufacturer General Electric and Britain's Rolls-Royce have also slashed 12,600 and 9,000 jobs respectively.

German airline group Lufthansa struck a nine-billion-euro (\$9.8 billion) rescue deal with the government on Monday, under which Berlin will become its main shareholder. Also in Germany, charter firm Condor, a subsidiary of bankrupt travel agency Thomas Cook, secured 550 million euros in loans, underwritten by the state. France and the Netherlands have rushed to the rescue of Air France-KLM with a plan of between nine and 11 billion euros. — AFP

Confusion, jitters as India domestic flights resume

NEW DELHI: Domestic flights resumed in India on Monday even as coronavirus cases surge, while confusion about quarantine rules prompted jitters among passengers and the cancellation of dozens of planes. India had halted all flights within the country, and departing and leaving for abroad, in late March as it sought to stop the spread of coronavirus with the world's largest lockdown.

But desperate to get Asia's third-largest economy moving again, the government announced last week that around 1,050 daily flights—a third of the usual capacity—would resume on Monday. Aviation Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said strict rules would include mandatory mask-wearing and thermal screenings, although middle seats on the aircraft would not be kept empty. The announcement reportedly caught airlines and state authorities off-guard, with several local governments announcing that passengers would have to go into quarantine for two weeks on arrival.

Maharashtra, the Indian state with the highest number of coronavirus cases, capped at 50 the number of departures and arrivals in and out of its capital Mumbai. Airlines scrapped dozens of flights on Monday while hundreds of passengers cancelled their bookings, reports said. The NDTV news



NEW DELHI: Passengers lineup to check-in outside the Indira Gandhi International airport during the first day of resuming of domestic flights after the government imposed a nationwide lockdown. — AFP

channel said 82 flights to and from New Delhi had been cancelled and nine at Bangalore airport. Other flights from cities including infection hotspots Mumbai and Chennai were struck off, many at short notice, reports said. At Mumbai airport social distancing was forgotten as irate passengers harangued staff after their flights were cancelled at the last minute.

'Really scary'

At New Delhi airport, hundreds of people anxious to get home but apprehensive about the risks queued from before dawn—all wearing masks and standing at least one metre (three feet) apart. Security personnel behind plastic screens verified check-in doc-

uments and that passengers had the government contact tracing app, Aarogya Setu, on their phones. "While I'm looking forward (to flying home), the idea of flying is really scary," student Gladia Laipubam told AFP as she stood in line. "Anything can happen. It's very risky. I don't really know when I'll be able to come back to Delhi now. There is no clarity from the university too at this time." One female airline employee wearing gloves, a mask and a protective face shield said she and many other colleagues felt "very nervous" about starting work again. "Dealing with so many people at this time is so risky. I must have interacted with at least 200 people since this morning," she told AFP, not wishing to be named. — AFP

Business

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10 LATAM largest airline driven to bankruptcy by coronavirus

10 IEA sees record drop in energy investment

11 As French airport buzzes with activity, others fall silent


PUERTO CABELLO: A worker of the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA waves an Iranian flag as the Iranian-flagged oil tanker Fortune docks at the El Palito refinery in Puerto Cabello, in the northern state of Carabobo, Venezuela, on Monday. — AFP

Iranian tanker docks at Venezuela port

Tehran providing Venezuela with 1.53m barrels of gasoline, much-needed oil

VALENCIA/CARACAS: The first of five Iranian tankers carrying fuel to Venezuela has moored at a port serving the El Palito refinery, the oil minister said on Tuesday and Refinitiv Eikon data showed a second vessel had entered its waters.

Iran is providing Venezuela with 1.53 million barrels of gasoline and refining components in a move criticized by US authorities as both countries are under US sanctions, according to the governments, sources and calculations by TankerTrackers.com.

Refinitiv Eikon data showed that the tanker Fortune docked at one of El Palito's berths around 1 am local time (0500 GMT). The second tanker to dock in Venezuela amid an acute gasoline shortage, "Forest", arrived at the Paraguana refinery complex in northwest Falcon state. Oil Minister Tarek El Aissami wrote on Twitter. He also shared photos of the vessel at the dock.

Data from the website Marine Traffic confirmed the



Countries defy US sanctions

location of the ship, which entered Venezuelan waters on Monday. The Paraguana refinery, the largest in Venezuela and one of the largest in the world, can process 950,000 barrels of fuel per day, but its production has plummeted alongside the country's crude supply. Venezuela is almost entirely dependent on its oil revenues but its production has fallen to roughly a quarter of its 2008 level.

Tarek El Aissami, Venezuela's economy vice president

and recently named oil minister, thanked Iran for sending "fuel, additives and spare parts" to increase fuel distribution and boost refinery output in the gasoline-starved country and criticized US sanctions.

"We are fortunate to be able to count on Iran in these times," El Aissami said from El Palito, calling the Fortune a "symbol of the brotherhood and solidarity" between Iran and Venezuela. "We cannot allow any world power to act like a super-police." A second vessel, the Forest, entered Venezuelan waters on Monday and was also heading to El Palito, according to its trajectory shown on the Eikon data. A third tanker, the Petunia, was approaching the Caribbean.

A senior Trump administration official said earlier this month Washington was considering a response to the shipments. A Pentagon spokesman said last week he was not aware of any military move planned. The first two vessels did not appear to face interference.

Neither the White House nor the State Department responded to requests for comment on Monday, an American holiday. Venezuela is suffering gasoline shortages due to the near-collapse of its 1.3 million barrel-per-day refining network after years of underinvestment, as well as US sanctions aimed at ousting socialist President Nicolas Maduro.

Venezuela's refining network in May increased its joint crude processing rate to about 215,000 barrels per day (bpd) from 110,000 bpd in March, following the arrival of spare parts supplied in flights by Iran's Mahan Air, according to three people familiar with the matter, who spoke on condition of anonymity. The 146,000-bpd El Palito refinery is now restarting its fluid catalytic cracker, a key unit for finished fuel production, one of the people said. The 187,000-bpd Puerto la Cruz refinery, which serves Venezuela's eastern region, remains out of service, the people said. — Agencies

Japan weighs fresh \$1.1tn virus stimulus

TOKYO: Japan will compile a new \$1.1 trillion stimulus package that includes significant direct spending, to stop the coronavirus pandemic pushing the world's third-largest economy deeper into recession, a budget draft seen by Reuters showed yesterday.

The 117 trillion yen stimulus, which will be funded partly by a second extra budget, will be on top of another 117 trillion package already rolled out last month. The new package puts the total amount Japan spends to combat the virus fallout at 234 trillion yen (\$2.18 trillion) — roughly 40 percent of Japan's gross domestic product.

The combined spending would also be among the largest fiscal packages to deal with the coronavirus in the world, approaching the size of United States' \$2.3 trillion aid program. The government's latest package, to be compiled yesterday, will include 33 trillion yen in direct spending, the draft showed.

"We must protect business and employment by any means in the face of the tough road ahead. We must also take all necessary measures to prepare for another wave of epidemic," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said in a meeting with ruling party lawmakers yesterday.

To fund the costs, Japan will issue an additional 31.9



TOKYO: A woman walks past an electronic quotation board displaying share prices of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo. Japan will compile a new \$1.1 trillion stimulus package to stop the coronavirus pandemic pushing the world's third-largest economy deeper into recession. — AFP

trillion yen in government bonds under the second supplementary budget for the current fiscal year ending in March 2021, according to the draft.

That will push new bond issuance for the current fiscal year to a record 90 trillion yen. When including issuance to roll over debt maturing during the year, Japan's total issuance for the year would hit a record, exceeding 200 trillion yen and further straining the

country's already tattered finances.

While the Bank of Japan will likely keep borrowing costs low with aggressive bond buying, the surprise increase in issuance of super-long bonds could trigger some volatility in markets, analysts say. "The BOJ's yield curve control should prevent a spike in long-term interest rates," Chotaro Morita, chief bond strategist at SMBC Nikko Security, said. "Volatility in the JGB market will depend on the BOJ's ability to control its bond purchases."

Under a policy dubbed yield curve control (YCC), the BOJ guides short-term interest rate at -0.1 percent and the 10-year bond yield around 0 percent. BOJ Governor Haruhiko Kuroda has said YCC is designed to maximize the impact of fiscal spending by keeping borrowing costs low, stressing the need for the government and the central bank to work closely together to combat the virus fallout.

The new package will include steps such as an increased medical spending, aid to firms struggling to pay rent, support for students who lost part-time jobs, and more subsidies to companies hit by slumping sales. The government will also set aside 10 trillion yen in reserves that can be tapped for emergency spending, Abe added.

In the meeting with ruling party lawmakers, Abe said the government would separately provide up to 140 trillion yen in financial assistance to firms hit by the pandemic. Japan's first 117 trillion yen package in April centered on cash payouts to households and steps to cope with the immediate damage from the pandemic. — Reuters

Renault, Nissan deepen tie-up for survival

PARIS/TOKYO: Renault, Nissan Motor Co and Mitsubishi Motors Corp said yesterday they would each take a lead on car manufacturing in different regions in a wide-ranging revamp of their partnership to slash costs and survive.

The three carmakers are reeling from the coronavirus pandemic which engulfed them just as they were trying to rework their alliance after the arrest in 2018 and subsequent ousting of its chairman and chief architect, Carlos Ghosn. The auto makers are aiming to make savings by sharing out their production more systematically in a so-called leader-follower system, with one company leading for a particular type of vehicle and geography and the others following.

They said in a joint statement that they aimed to produce nearly half of their car output under the new leader-follower approach by 2025 and hoped to cut investment per model by up to 40 percent for vehicles under the scheme.

Nissan will take the lead in Japan, China and North America. Renault will be the reference for Europe, Russia, South America and North Africa while Mitsubishi will lead in Southeast Asia and Oceania, the companies said. — Reuters

Business

LATAM largest airline driven to bankruptcy by coronavirus

Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay units not part of Chapter 11 filing

BRASILIA: LATAM Airlines Group, the continent's largest carrier, filed for US bankruptcy protection on Tuesday, becoming the world's largest carrier so far to seek an emergency reorganization due to the coronavirus pandemic. The filing highlights the financial weakness of Latin America's carriers, following a similar bankruptcy earlier this month by the region's No 2 airline Avianca Holdings.

But unlike Avianca, which experienced management turmoil and losses, Chile's LATAM posted profits for the last four consecutive years totaling more than \$700 million. LATAM had also approved a dividend payment this year, in contrast to other carriers that have halted payouts. Shares in Latin America's largest airline plunged on the New York and Santiago stock exchanges on Tuesday after LATAM filed for bankruptcy in the US.

LATAM has suffered a drastic slump in business due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit travel and tourism all over the world. Last month the airline scaled back operations by 95 percent.

One of the world's largest airlines, LATAM said it would continue to fly through its bankruptcy restructuring. LATAM shares sank 51 percent in Santiago, while ADRs remained suspended in US trading.

Latin American governments, many under severe budget constraints themselves, have been reluctant to bail out their key airlines, in contrast to the United States and Europe. Most recently, Germany bailed out Lufthansa for a 20 percent stake.

Chile's Economy Minister Lucas Palacios said on Tuesday he would not rule out a bailout, although he did not propose one. "Lufthansa's case is completely different," Palacios said. "LATAM is an international airline, its shares trade in the United States."

In a separate statement, Chile's finance ministry said LATAM is a "strategic company for Chile" and that the government would "consider" how it could contribute to LATAM's restructuring.

In Brazil, LATAM has been negotiating a bailout of up to 2 billion reais (\$367.45 million) that has yet to materialize. LATAM's Brazil unit is not part of the bankruptcy, and the company said it might file for bankruptcy there as well if the negotiations for aid fall through.

Delta Air Lines last year paid \$1.9 billion for a 20 percent stake in LATAM during rosier times for the air travel industry, becoming the No. 2 shareholder in the company. A plan to coordinate flight routes between Latin America and the United States remains in place, the airlines said. If anything, LATAM said its bankruptcy filing would seek to expedite the timeline for the necessary antitrust approvals to do so. In the lead-up to the bankruptcy filing, LATAM laid off 1,800 employees out of over 40,000 in total. "This path represents the best option," Chief Executive Roberto Alvo said in a statement regarding bankruptcy.

LATAM is an instantly recognizable brand for South Americans, dominating international air travel in the region, as well as a leading domestic flight operator in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Peru and Ecuador. In addition



Around 1,800 workers laid off



SANTIAGO: In this file photo, aircraft of Latam airline sit on the tarmac at Santiago International Airport, in Santiago, during the new coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic. Latin America's biggest airline, the Brazilian-Chilean group LATAM, filed for bankruptcy in the US.—AFP

to Brazil, subsidiaries in Argentina and Paraguay are also not part of the bankruptcy process.

LATAM said it raised up to \$900 million to support operations through its bankruptcy reorganization from major shareholders, including the Cueto family which controls the airline and Qatar Airways.

In addition, LATAM has \$1.3 billion in cash on hand. LATAM was born in 2012 through a merger between Chile's LAN and Brazil's TAM, spawning a carrier with large aircraft order books and major exposure to Latin America's top economy as it went through its worst recession on record. It has since dropped many plane orders but maintains 44 with Airbus and 7 with Boeing

Co. LATAM said it would seek to cancel several of those orders.

LATAM did disclose that Delta canceled the planned purchase of four Airbus A350s from LATAM, and paid \$62 million to break the deal.

LATAM said that as of Tuesday, it had \$7.6 billion in debt, including \$460 million in loans tied to its Brazilian subsidiary. The airline was downgraded by S&P and Fitch on Friday after not paying interest and principal on \$1 billion worth of debt tied to new aircraft purchases. Investment bank Moelis & Co is in talks to represent bondholders owning around \$3 billion in debt owed by LATAM, a source said.—Reuters

Estonia workers flock home from Finland

HELSINKI: When Finland locked its borders in March during the coronavirus crisis, tens of thousands of migrant workers from Estonia had an excruciating choice to make: stay put, or go home to see family—and risk losing their jobs.

For father of two teenagers Rain Anni, the decision wasn't easy but he opted to stay and make money, not knowing when he would see his family again. "Everyone I know made the same choice, that we'd stay here," the construction site foreman told AFP. For 15 years, Anni has been taking a two-hour ferry ride home every week to see his wife and kids, a break from his job in Finland, where thousands like him work—often earning more than they could back home, but with limited job security. But when Finland closed its borders on March 18, he wasn't sure when—or if—he would be allowed back in.

"It's always nicer to be together with my family but we had to make a decision," Anni said. Before the crisis, an estimated 50,000 Estonian workers like Anni commuted regularly across the Baltic Sea to jobs in Finland, where average salaries are twice as high. Migrants from post-Soviet Estonia have become vital to Finland's economy, especially in the construction sector where

Estonian labor accounts for almost a quarter of the workforce.

Going back home to see friends and family is a lifeline for many, said Timo Ahola, head of construction at the Finnish recruitment agency Barona. He said that all of the 400 Estonian workers on his books have journeyed home since the lockdown was lifted on May 14.

"It's had a huge impact on their wellbeing, that they can at last see their families," Ahola told AFP.

Vulnerable position

For many Estonian construction workers, the commute to Finland for work is an easy journey—but keeping a good job can be tough. "They often work in smaller companies or for agencies, so it often happens that they lose their jobs first," Matti Harjunieni, chair of Finland's construction trade union, told AFP.

Only about 15 percent of Estonian workers returned home once coronavirus lockdown started, a decision which was not always voluntary, Harjunieni said.

Demolitionist Marek Resev, who has commuted to Finland for almost two years, spent the two months of lockdown at home in Jarva-Jaani, central Estonia, after being



HELSINKI: Passengers arriving with the Tallink Megastar ferry (unseen) from Tallin, Estonia, at West Harbour terminal in Helsinki, Finland. At Helsinki harbor, stewards direct a long line of cars and vans with Estonian number plates onto the Tallink Megastar ferry, now that a change in lockdown rules allows thousands of cross-border workers stuck in Finland to finally return home.—AFP

laid off in March. "I got a lot done at home, mowed the lawn and spent lots of time with my partner," he told AFP.

"But I've been worrying about money the whole time."

Since the border was reopened, Resev has found work again in Finland, but says he fears the uncertainty of the coming months.

Limited relief

It was not just migrant workers hit by the border being shut down. Traffic on the commuter ferries that would normally shuffle the workers between Finland and Estonia dropped dramatically.

Now passenger numbers are up to

about 6,400 per day between their capitals, up from 1,200 during the lockdown, Commander Mikko Simola of the Finnish coast-guard told AFP.

But it's still a far cry from the 32,000 travellers that used to board the ships every day before the outbreak. The revival of commuter traffic has provided welcome, if limited, relief for Baltic ferry operators.

"It's small but it's something nonetheless," Marika Nojd of Tallink Silja, one of the Baltic's largest ferry operators, said.

"For the last few weeks we've only had lorries on board," Nojd said, adding that they still only have a tenth of pre-virus passenger traffic.—AFP

Eurozone bond yields down; focus on fund

LONDON: Eurozone government bond yields edged down yesterday, easing off from Tuesday's highs, as investors waited for proposals about the EU recovery fund which are due to be presented by the European Parliament. The European Commission will announce a plan to help the EU economy recover from its coronavirus slump with a mix of grants, loans and guarantees exceeding 1 trillion euros that raised controversy even before it was announced.

Hopes for a co-ordinated fiscal response to the coronavirus crisis have been boosted since France and Germany made proposals for a 500-billion-euro recovery fund. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was expected to present a proposal for the EU recovery fund to the European Parliament later.

"The French-German proposal was a bold move that crosses a previous red line in Europe: joint fiscal responsibility. However, four northern European states - Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden - have tabled an alternative proposal that would only offer loans, rather than grants," Marshall Gittler, Head of Investment Research at BDSwiss Group, wrote in a note to clients. "Given the absence of any common ground between the two plans, all eyes will be on the EC to see how they square the circle or instead come down on one side or the other—or fail to, as the case may be," he wrote. The German 10-year government bond yield, which on Tuesday hit a one-month high, eased slightly, last down 2 basis points at -0.442 percent.

Italy's 10-year government bond yield, which on Tuesday fell to a seven-week low as risk assets rallied during as global risk appetite improved, was little changed, last at 1.552 percent.

The Italian-German 10-year yield spread held near six-week lows at 199.30 bps. It fell below 200 bps on Tuesday for the first time since mid-April. On Tuesday, sources told Reuters that the ECB was drafting contingency plans to carry out its multi-trillion bond-buying program without the Bundesbank in case Germany's top court forces the main participant in the scheme to quit.—Reuters

IEA sees record drop in energy investment

PARIS: The energy industry is set to suffer a record drop in investment due to the coronavirus fallout, the IEA said yesterday, and while renewables are likely to fare better than oil, any swift economic recovery could create a global fuel crunch.

In its annual report on energy investments, the Paris-based International Energy Agency (IEA) estimated the plunge will be of the order of one-fifth from 2019 levels, or almost \$400 billion, as firms slash spending amid slumping demand for energy. Shale oil producers that catapulted the United States to the world's top crude nation stand to suffer the worst decline, the IEA said.

"All the energy sectors—oil, gas, renewables—everything is affected but the biggest impact is on shale oil," the agency's director Fatih Birol told AFP in an interview. "Total oil investments we expect to decline one third this year whereas the shale industry will see a decline of about 50 percent."

However, spending in renewable power projects is expected to fall by only around 10 percent for the year, the report said. "Even though this 'clean' spending is set to dip in 2020, its share in total energy investment is set to rise," it noted.

But it noted "these investment levels remain far short of what would be required to put the world on a more sustainable pathway," estimating that spending on renewable power would need to double by the late 2020s.

Crisis to come?

The IEA has long warned that insufficient investment may leave the industry unable to meet rising demand. "There is a risk that today's cutbacks lead to future market imbalances, prompting new energy price cycles or volatility," it said.



OSLO: In this file photo, Fatih Birol, head of the International Energy Agency (IEA) speaks at the Autumn conference of Equinor, a Norwegian multinational energy company, in Oslo, Norway.—AFP

If oil investment stays at 2020 levels then supply in 2025 would be 9 million barrels per day less than had been expected, the IEA estimated, which could mean tight markets and higher prices if demand resumes its pre-crisis rising trajectory. While some may see a drop in spending on oil as a positive development, Birol warned of negative consequences.

"We hope to see a clean energy transition, this should be an orderly energy transition, well designed so it doesn't cause any crisis, any shock," he said.

"It shouldn't be as a result of Covid, it should be as a result of the right energy policies," Birol signalled in this regard a concerning jump in approvals for coal projects in Asia.

"The findings of our reports are worrying but my chief concern is that the lockdown we have around the world may lead to a lock in of inefficient and old technologies, especially in the emerging world where there are huge debt and financing problems," he said.

The IEA chief called on governments to favor clean energy projects in their coronavirus recovery plans. "If the governments include the right energy policies in order to accelerate the clean energy transition, we may well see a rebound in clean energy." —AFP

French economy making 'clear' recovery

PARIS: Economic activity in France is making a clear if cautious recovery after lockdown measures were relaxed earlier this month but the country is still heading for a roughly 20 percent contraction this quarter, the national statistics agency said yesterday.

INSEE said that the French economy was currently running "at roughly four-fifths of its pre-crisis level" compared to two-thirds during the lockdown period. France ordered non-essential businesses closed and people to stay at home in mid-March, or nearly at the end of the first quarter, in order to slow the spread of the new coronavirus.

The full impact of the measures which stifled economic activity will only be seen this quarter, which lasts through June, although the restrictions began to be eased on May 11.

INSEE said it expects gross domestic product (GDP) — the broadest measure of economic activity in a country—to fall "around 20 percent" this quarter. That would be "the severest recession since the creation of the national accounts in 1948", said INSEE, which warned that the forecast should be considered with caution given the uncertainty about the pace of economic recovery in the coming weeks. France's GDP fell by 5.8 percent in the first quarter.

'Prudent but clear' recovery

Nevertheless, INSEE said it had seen a "cautious but clear" resumption of economic activity after lockdown measures were eased, and that consumer spending was rebounding. "Economic activity in June could be on the order of 14 percent below normal (after -25 percent on average in May and -35 percent on average in April)," INSEE estimated. A return to normal will likely take many months, it warned, and even if economic activity returned to pre-crisis levels in July, that France's GDP would still drop by 8 percent during 2020 overall.

That is the French government's current forecast. "But such a quick return to normal seems unlikely," said INSEE, noting that French businesses also now had to deal with a slower global economy due to the coronavirus crisis. While consumer spending rebounded after lockdown, consumer confidence slid a bit further from the sharp drop registered in April when lockdown measures were in force the entire month.

INSEE's consumer's confidence index fell by two points to stand at 93 points in May, after dropping by 8 points the previous month. The index is calculated so that 100 is the long-term average.

"Households are displaying a marked pessimism concerning France's economic situation," said INSEE. On the other hand, the business confidence index rose slightly, to 59 points, after having hit a revised 53 points in April, the lowest ever reading since INSEE began to calculate the index in 1980.

"Indicators about future activity have stopped plunging, but the declarations about the outlook remain bleak," said INSEE.—AFP

Business

As French airport buzzes with activity, others fall silent

Chateauroux airport, a destination for immobile planes

DEOLS, France: Most airports have become ghost towns since measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic drastically reduced air traffic, but one in central France is buzzing with activity.

The closure of borders around the world prompted airline companies to seek out a place to park their fleets. Chateauroux airport, outside the town of the same name in central France, rapidly became a popular destination for these immobile planes, as it inherited large amounts of space from its military history and is cheaper for airlines than airports near Paris.

Grounded planes require extensive maintenance, spurring a flurry of activity at Marcel-Dassault airport despite the lack of passengers.

In total, 40 aeroplanes lie dormant at Chateauroux, belonging to British Airways, Hong Kong Airlines, Air Caraïbes, Egyptair, Brazilian company Azul and Chinese company Loong Air, amongst others.

Usually, the airport is a quiet departure point for a handful of charter flights mainly to summer holiday destinations. "We will be welcoming another fifteen planes in the coming days. We have space for a dozen more," said airport head Didier Lefresne.



40 planes lie dormant at Chateauroux

politician Marcel Dassault, known for founding the major industrial company Groupe Dassault which today owns the right-wing newspaper Le Figaro.

"The Americans developed the airport between 1951 and 1967, by building a runway of 2,500 metres (today 3,500 metres) and huge parking areas," said Lefresne, adding that the airport used to be NATO's most important military base in Europe.

Lefresne said that when the size of the planes is taken into account, the airport doesn't have that much space. "We have 40 hectares of property available," he said. "If the market takes that direction it could increase our ability to host planes." Lefresne added, referring to the potential lasting decrease of air traffic which would raise the demand for hosting capacities.

It is not the only airport in Europe enjoying such a boom—Teruel airport in central Spain currently has some 100 aircraft parked on its tarmac. Space isn't the only advantage of Chateauroux airport. "We are definitely cheaper than the airports located around Paris," said Lefresne, adding that there were many maintenance companies based at the airport.

Airplanes 'cocooned'

Dale Aviation is one of the companies that looks after the airplanes. "A plane that isn't flying needs to



Chateauroux airport rapidly became a popular destination for these immobile planes as it inherited large amounts of space from its military history and is cheaper for airlines than airports near Paris. — AFP

be maintained in order to keep its value," said the founder of the company Makto Dadic. "Aircraft have to be protected from the different influences of the atmosphere, humidity and dust. Everything is lubricated and protected. We call it 'cocooning,'" he said. "Some tasks need to take place every week, others every two weeks, every month. It's rather demand-

ing," said Dadic, as one of his employees wearing protective earmuffs ran the engines of a Boeing.

Maintenance activities aren't the only source of noise on the tarmac. Air freight planes are often taking off and landing. "We have tripled our freight activity. We have two or three planes every day," said Lefresne. — AFP

NATO military base
The airport was built in 1936 by the engineer and

Macron unveils 8bn-euro French auto rescue

ÉTAPLES, France: President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday announced an 8-billion euro (\$8.8 billion) plan to revive France's auto industry by making it the European leader in electric cars, boosting a sector brought to its knees by the coronavirus.

Macron said the package would include one billion euros in subsidies to encourage purchases of electric and hybrid cars and set a target of France producing a million green cars annually by 2025.

The "historic" intervention will aim to turn France's rechargeable car industry into Europe's biggest, the president said.

Visiting a car factory in Etaples in northern France, Macron said his government would seek to boost flagging customer demand with a subsidy of 7,000 euros for each individual buying an electric car, 5,000 for each company purchase, and 2,000 per hybrid rechargeable car.

Starting June 1, there would also be an aid of 3,000 euros for converting from a petrol-fuelled car to a less-polluting one — and as much as 5,000 euros to upgrade to an electric vehicle, the president said.

He said that some three quarters of French people would be eligible for the incentives. "In total, the state will provide a bit more than 8 billion euros in aid to the



ETAPLES: Employees, wearing protective face masks, walk in an alley at a factory of manufacturer Valeo in Etaples, near Le Touquet, northern France on Tuesday during a visit of French President as part of the launch of a plan to rescue the French car industry. — AFP

sector," said Macron.

'Never before'

France, the home of Renault, Citroen and Peugeot, has seen car sales and revenue slashed by some 80 percent as a result of a two-month nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus, said Macron.

By the end of June, some half a million cars will have gone unsold.

"This has never been seen by this sector which represents close to 16 percent of the revenue of our industrial sector," said the president. The car industry in France is critical to the French economy — comprising some 4,000 businesses, 400,000 direct employees and 900,000 in total.

The president said the plan was aimed at "defending our industrial employment,

which is going to be faced with one of the most serious crises in its history" and also protecting France's "industrial automobile sovereignty".

"And it is also a plan for the future of the automobile in the 21st century," he added.

The plan won a warm welcome from the head of the sector association Plateforme Automobile, Luc Chatel. "This sets out a new ambition for the auto industry in France and responds to the gravity of the situation", he told France Info radio.

"Excluding periods of war, we are going through the most serious crisis in the history of the auto sector," he added. Chatel applauded the plan for one million electric or hybrid cars annually by 2025 as "realistic". — AFP

Denmark faces huge economic contraction

COPENHAGEN: Denmark's economy is facing its biggest contraction since World War Two this year as a result of global coronavirus lockdown measures, the finance ministry said on Tuesday.

"It is serious. The corona crisis is likely to affect the Danish economy for several years going forward. But we have paved the road for a way out of the crisis, and we have already taken the first important steps," Finance Minister Nicolai Wammen said in a statement.

In April, Wammen said Denmark was facing one of the "darkest chapters" in its history as the government predicted a contraction this year of between 3 percent to 6 percent. The finance ministry now expects the economy to shrink by 5.3 percent

this year, down from a pre-coronavirus crisis forecast of 1.5 percent growth. In comparison, the euro zone economy is expected to contract 7.5 percent in 2020, according to a Reuters poll of economists.

During the financial crisis in 2009, the Danish economy shrunk by 4.9 percent. Growth next year is expected to be around 4 percent, up from a December forecast of 1.4 percent. Denmark has injected more than 300 billion crowns into the economy in aid packages including tax and VAT payment extensions and direct subsidies.

"The temporary aid packages need to be phased out and replaced with wise investments and initiatives to kick-start the economic activity," Wammen said.

On Monday, the finance ministry tripled its estimated domestic financing need for 2020, as it now aims to borrow 294 billion crowns, mainly to fund the increase in fiscal spending. Denmark was among the first countries to shut down in March to curb the coronavirus epidemic and has been one of the first to reopen after successfully stifling the virus outbreak. — Reuters

Russia consumer demand drops, jobless jump

MOSCOW: Retail sales in Russia fell more than expected in April, while unemployment jumped above forecasts during a dire first full month of coronavirus lockdown for the country, data from statistics service Rosstat showed on Tuesday.

Russia's economic health is in focus after a slump in the price of oil, its key export, and the coronavirus pandemic combined to batter the ruble and prompted the central bank to slash rates to prop up the economy. Retail sales, a barometer of consumer demand that is Russia's main driver of economic growth, fell 23.4% in April from a year before and shrank by 28.5% month-on-month.

Analysts polled by Reuters in late April had on average expected retail sales to decline by 15 percent year-on-year. Rosstat data last week showed industrial output shrank 6.6 percent in April, driven by a drop in the manufacturing sector as the lockdown paralyzed most Russian business activity.

Economic indicators deteriorated in April as the coronavirus outbreak gained momentum in Russia, which now has the third-highest number of cases globally. The Russian central bank has signalled its readiness to sharply cut its key rate, now at 5.5 percent, next month. Lower rates are designed to support the economy by making lending cheaper and reducing the appeal of bank deposits.

Rosstat also said the number of people unemployed rose to 5.8 percent of the workforce in April, up from 4.7 percent in March, reinforcing concerns about worsening living standards. Analysts had forecast unemployment of 5.5 percent. — Reuters

Virus response could renew fears of euro breakup: ECB

FRANKFURT: A vast fiscal fightback to the coronavirus crisis unleashed by eurozone governments could raise questions about capitals' ability to repay debts and revive the threat of countries exiting the single currency, the European Central Bank warned Tuesday.

"The increase in public debt comes on top of already higher debt levels in some sovereigns," ECB Vice-President Luis de Guindos said.

"In the medium term we have to pay attention to the fiscal sustainability situation," de Guindos added, presenting a report that warned of possible increase in fears of "redenomination risk"—the danger of some countries quitting the euro or the single currency collapsing altogether.

Indicators of the risk have surged for Spain and Italy in the first half of 2020, while France's have picked up slightly. The ECB forecasts that eurozone public debt as a share of output will grow by between seven and 22 percentage points in 2020 as governments borrow hundreds of billions to support their economies, driving the total debt-to-GDP ratio in the region from 86 to almost 103 percent.

In normal times, eurozone countries target public debt below 60 percent, although that boundary has been suspended during



FRANKFURT: A woman and police officers wearing face masks are pictured in front of the European Central Bank (ECB) headquarter during a rally against restrictions in place to limit the spread of the new coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic in Frankfurt am Main. — AFP

the pandemic crisis.

"Different countries have taken fiscal stimuli measures and those are the correct ones in order to address the short-term problems produced by the crisis," de Guindos said. "The public debt ratio... will go up," he acknowledged, "but the alternative, that was not using fiscal policy, could be much worse".

Eyes on Brussels

So far, the ECB's announcements of over one trillion euros (\$1.1 trillion) in bond-buying this year alone have kept a lid on investors' perceptions of comparative risk between highly-indebted and fiscally unencumbered nations.

But the so-called "spreads"—differences between the yields on countries' debt—"might increase if investors assess that public debt sustainability has deteriorated," the

ECB report said. "A more severe and prolonged economic contraction than envisaged... would risk putting the public debt to GDP ratio on an unsustainable path," prompting fears to "cascade" to the rest of the economy, the central bank warned.

Market players could question the value of banks' sovereign bond holdings, as well as governments' ability to uphold the state guarantees that have helped keep credit flowing to non-financial firms through the virus crisis. The ECB reiterated its long-standing message that more joint action at the European level could keep government debt sustainable for individual nations.

More bonds from "highly rated European entities" rather than national capitals "will arguably reduce overall sovereign funding costs and, in some jurisdictions, decrease sovereign spreads," the central bank economists wrote. — AFP

German investor morale improves

BERLIN: German consumer morale improved slightly heading into June after hitting its lowest level on record in the previous month, a survey showed on Tuesday, suggesting that Europe's largest economy is slowly recovering from the coronavirus pandemic.

The GfK consumer sentiment indicator, based on a survey of some 2,000 Germans, remained in negative territory, but rose to -18.9 points from an upwardly revised -23.1 in the previous month. The reading undershot a Reuters poll of analysts who had predicted a somewhat bigger rebound to -18.3. The gradual reopening of many

businesses across the country helped to lift the propensity to buy, GfK researcher Rolf Buerkl said.

But he added that uncertainty remained high as consumers anticipated a severe recession. "Anxiety over job losses remains high and has proven to be a key barrier to consumption at this time, alongside losses in income," Buerkl said. "Retailers and manufacturers must continue to adapt to this situation." The improved consumer climate went hand in hand with a drop in propensity to save. Income expectations rose slightly but remained well below their level from a year ago as unemployment and reduced working hours led to income losses. "For a number of freelancers, for example from the culture sector, there is still no end in sight for the lockdown. This means their income remains at zero," Buerkl said. — Reuters

SpaceX's moment of triumph arrives

CAPE CANAVERAL: A new era in space begins today with the launch by SpaceX of two NASA astronauts into space, a capability that for six decades symbolized the power of a handful of states, and which the United States itself had been deprived of for nine years.

If the bad weather clears, at 4:33 pm (20:33 GMT) a SpaceX rocket with the new Crew Dragon capsule on top was scheduled to take off from Launch Pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center, the same from which Neil Armstrong and his Apollo crewmates left for their historic journey to the Moon.

Piloted by NASA astronauts Bob Behnken and Doug Hurley, it heads for the International Space Station. The flight is going ahead despite shutdowns caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The two men have been in quarantine for the past two weeks.

Space Exploration Technologies Corp. was founded in 2002 by a Mars-obsessed entrepreneur determined to break the rules of the aerospace industry's game, Elon Musk.

Gradually, it has earned the trust of the planet's largest space agency.

By 2012, it had become the first private company to dock a cargo capsule at the ISS, resupplying the station regularly ever since.

Two years later, NASA ordered the next step: to transport its astronauts there, starting in 2017, by adapting the Dragon capsule.

"SpaceX would not be here without NASA," said Musk last year, after a successful dress rehearsal without humans for the trip to the ISS.

The space agency paid more than \$3 billion for SpaceX to design, build, test and operate its reusable capsule for six future space round trips.

The development has experienced delays, explosions, and parachute problems — but even so SpaceX has beaten the aviation giant Boeing to the punch.

NASA is also paying Boeing to build its own capsule, the Starliner, which is still not ready. The move by NASA to invest in privately-developed

spacecraft — a more economic proposition than spending tens of billions of dollars developing such systems itself, as it had done for decades — was started under the presidency of George W. Bush for cargo, and later under Barack Obama for human flight.

"Some have said it is unfeasible or unwise to work with the private sector in this way. I disagree," Obama said in 2010 at the Kennedy Space Center. At the time, there was immense hostility in Congress and NASA to the start-up's claims of what it could achieve.

Trump to attend

A decade on it is another president, Donald Trump, who was to attend the launch in Florida.

The Republican is trying to reaffirm American domination of space, militarily but also by having ordered a return to the Moon in 2024.

If NASA could entrust "low Earth orbit" space travel to the private sector, it would free up dollars for its more distant missions.

"We envision a future where low Earth orbit is entirely commercialized where NASA is one customer of many customers," said Jim Bridenstine, the agency's administrator.

"If we keep using American taxpayer dollars ... we'll never get to the Moon and on to Mars." It has rained a lot in Florida in recent days, and Cape Canaveral forecasters estimated Tuesday the risk of unfavorable weather at 40 percent. If necessary, the flight will be postponed to Saturday.

Crew Dragon is a capsule like Apollo, but updated for the 21st century.

Touch screens have replaced switches. The interior is dominated by white, more subtle lighting.

It looks entirely different to the enormous space shuttles, huge winged vehicles that carried astronauts into space from US soil from 1981 to 2011. "We're expecting a smooth ride but we're expecting a loud ride," said Behnken, who, like



CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida: Workers prepare the SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket with the Crew Dragon spacecraft attached for today's scheduled liftoff from launch pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center. — AFP

Hurley, also flew in the shuttles twice.

Unlike the shuttles, one of which — the Challenger — exploded in 1986 after take-off, Dragon can eject in an emergency if the Falcon 9 rocket has a problem.

Crew Dragon will catch up with the station on Thursday at an altitude of 400 kilometers, and will probably remain docked there until August.

If it fulfils its mission and is certified safe, it will

mean the Americans will no longer depend on the Russians for access to space: since 2011, the Russian Soyuz rockets were the only space taxis available.

Launches will become a regular occurrence in Florida again, with four astronauts aboard. A Japanese astronaut is set to be on the following trip. NASA would like a Russian cosmonaut to join next. — AFP

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- (IFSO) member .
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Lifestyle | Features

JK Rowling to publish fairy tale free for locked-down children

The creator of the "Harry Potter" books JK Rowling said on Tuesday she would release a free online serialisation of a bed-time story she wrote for her children 10 years ago. The superstar British writer said she decided to pull "The Ickabog" story "down from the attic" and publish it for children forced to stay at home during the coronavirus lockdown. "My now teenagers were touchingly enthusiastic, so downstairs came the very dusty box, and for the last few weeks I've been immersed in a fictional world I thought I'd never enter again," she said in a statement.

Rowling said she would post the first two chapters on a dedicated website — www.theickabog.com — on Tuesday, with 34 further instalments released each weekday until July 10. She then intends to publish the

story in English in November and other languages later on. All royalties will be given to projects assisting groups particularly affected by the pandemic. Written to be read aloud, "The Ickabog" is a story "in the fairy tale tradition" set in an imaginary land and aimed primarily at children aged between seven and nine.

It is unrelated to any of Rowling's other previous works, though she noted it was penned "in fits and starts" between her "Harry Potter" books. "The Ickabog" is a story about truth and the abuse of power," she said, adding it was not "intended to be read as a response to anything that's happening in the world right now". "The themes are timeless and could apply to any era or any country," she said. The author is inviting budding young artists inspired by its "host of

colourful characters and fast-paced plot" to illustrate the story and enter their artworks into a global competition being run by her publishers.

The winners will have their drawings included in the published book in their part of the world. "Having decided to publish, I thought how wonderful it would be if children in lockdown, or otherwise needing distraction during the strange and difficult time we're passing through, illustrated the story for me," she said. Rowling added she wanted to see "imaginings run wild". "Creativity, inventiveness and effort are the most important things; we aren't necessarily looking for the most technical skill!" she said.—AFP



JK Rowling

Mourners gather for funeral of Guinean singer Mory Kante

Hundreds of people gathered to mourn the death of Guinean singer Mory Kante in his native country's capital Conakry on Tuesday, to the sound of keening and traditional musical laments. Kante, who helped introduce African music to a world audience in the 1980s, died in Conakry on Friday after age 70 after succumbing to untreated health problems. Restrictions related to the global coronavirus pandemic had prevented him from travelling abroad to seek medical help.

Born into a celebrated family of "griots" — traditional singer-poets — Kante is best known for his dance song "Yeke Yeke," which was a huge hit in Africa before becoming a No. 1 in several European countries in 1988. At a pre-burial ceremony on the grounds of a Conakry hospital on Tuesday, two women collapsed in tears as the musician's coffin, which was draped in the Guinean flag, was laid inside a tent.

Some 200 people — relatives, friends and government officials — attended the ceremony, where Mandingo griots sang laments accompanied by kora

and balofon music. Hundreds more mourners stood outside the hospital grounds, and followed the cortege as it made its way to a nearby cemetery. A large contingent of Kante's family, including many of his 14 children, were unable to attend the funeral because of coronavirus restrictions.

"They are all stuck in Paris, in Ivory Coast, in Mali, and even in the United States," said Kader Yomba, one of the musician's sons, who managed to attend the funeral. "It's sad and a shame," he added. Guinea is one of the African countries that has been worst hit by the coronavirus pandemic, with authorities having recorded over 3,300 cases to date, with 20 fatalities. It has closed its borders in a bid to curb infections.

Guinea's culture minister, Sanoussi Bantama Sow, promised that a more fitting ceremony would be held for Kante after the pandemic ebbs. Kante's death sparked an outpouring of tributes from musicians and dignitaries across the world. Guinean President Alpha Conde tweeted on Friday that "African culture is in mourning".—AFP



In this file photo taken on July 14, 2010 Guinea's singer Mory Kante performs during the 46th session of the International Carthage festival at the Roman theatre in Carthage, near Tunis.—AFP photos



This photo taken on April 12, 2020 shows Italian tenor and opera singer Andrea Bocelli sing during a rehearsal on a deserted Piazza del Duomo in central Milan.—AFP

Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli says he had coronavirus

Renowned Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli said Tuesday he had caught the novel coronavirus but was now recovered, describing the experience as "a nightmare". Bocelli, who has been blind since age 12, raised spirits in Italy during the pandemic, which has killed nearly 33,000 people, by singing alone in Milan's Duomo on April 12. That was just over a month after the 61-year-old had tested positive for the virus. "It was a tragedy, my whole family was contaminated," he told journalists at a hospital in Pisa where he had gone with his wife to donate their plasma for COVID-19 research.

The blood plasma will be used by scientists hoping to develop treatments. "We all had a fever—though thankfully not high ones—with sneezing and coughing," Bocelli said. "I had to cancel many concerts... It was like living a nightmare because I felt like I was no longer in control of things. I was hoping to wake up at any moment," he said. The singer, who has sold over 90 million records worldwide, said he "thanks God" he was not a politician who had to take decisions but felt there was "too much scaremongering" about COVID-19 in Italy now the crisis appears to have passed its peak.—AFP



In this file photo taken on July 20, 2012 US drummer Jimmy Cobb performs during the 47th Heineken Jazzaldia, in the northern Spanish city of San Sebastian.—AFP

'Kind of Blue' jazz drummer Jimmy Cobb dies

Jimmy Cobb, the drummer on Miles Davis's 1959 jazz classic "Kind of Blue"—revered by critics as one of the greatest albums of all time—has died aged 91, US media reported Monday. His wife Eleana Cobb said the musician died on Sunday of lung cancer at home in Manhattan, according to broadcaster NPR and other outlets. "He was a very special and unusual person—a gifted musician with natural talent, like an athlete," she told the New York Daily News.

Cobb had been the last surviving member of the sextet who recorded "Kind of Blue" over two days in a converted church in New York. Led by Davis at the height of his career on his crisp and soulful trumpet, the group included saxophone legends John Coltrane and Julian "Cannonball" Adderley, pianists Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly, and bassist Paul Chambers. In a 2009 interview with AFP, Cobb said Davis had only told the group what he wanted after they arrived at the Columbia Records studio. "It was just something Miles had on a slip of manuscript paper," he said.

Most of it was done in one take, "because that's what Miles liked. If you keep doing it over it gets to be stale a little bit. He figured your first shot is your best shot." "Kind of Blue" was another venture by Davis into modal jazz—which emerged in the 1950s and in which improvisations are based on scales, or modes, rather than a sequence of chords, allowing more freedom of melodic expression.—AFP



The coffin of the late Guinean singer Mory Kante is displayed during his funeral on Monday in Conakry Guinea.



Mourners cry during the funeral of the late Guinean singer Mory Kante.

Last Paris street singer takes final bow

Paris' last street singer—who once competed with Edith Piaf to draw the crowds—has died, her godson said Monday. Lily Lian, a legend of Paris working class life who was immortalised twice in full flow with her loud hailer by the photographer Robert Doisneau, died on Sunday in a hospital near Paris aged 103. A friend of the crooner Maurice Chevalier and of actor and singer Yves Montand, she was regarded as the last exponent of a 300-year-old trade, where singers sold lyrics and sheet music for their songs on the street.

Known as "Lily Panam", after the slang term "Paname" for the French capital, she began her career with Piaf in its cafes and on street corners where singers were the walking jukeboxes of pre-war Paris. But with the spread of radios and record players, street singers found it hard to compete, and Lian never quite made the transition into the indoor entertainment industry despite her good looks. Born in 1917 when World War I was at its height, she lost her father, a communist resistance fighter, in 1944. But the one-time muse of the songwriter Vincent Scotto had something of renaissance in the 1980s after writing her autobiography, "Lily Panam: Memories of the Last Street Singer".—AFP



This file picture taken in the 50's shows French singer Lily Lian posing during a photo session at the Harcourt studios in Paris.—AFP

Galaxy of African stars hold virtual coronavirus concert

Senegalese superstar Youssou N'Dour and Grammy-winner Angélique Kidjo were among a galaxy of African talent brought together for a virtual concert to raise awareness of the coronavirus pandemic. More than 100 artists and celebrities from across the continent and the diaspora took part in the WAN Show broadcast online by the Worldwide Afro Network and carried by 200 African channels on Monday to mark Africa Day. "After COVID-19, Africa will be great, Africa will be strong. Together we are unbeatable," Malian kora star and hip-hop artist Sidiki Diabate said at the launch of the virtual concert.

The event was modelled after the "One World: Together At Home" concert in April that brought together Taylor Swift and the Rolling Stones playing from their homes. Malian Afro-pop star Salif Keita, Congolese singer Fally Ipupa, Nigeria's Wizkid, Femi Kuti, Senegalese rapper Awadi, Ivory Coast's Magic System and Beninese singer Zeynab were among the stars performing from their living rooms, studio or garden, ending their songs with the line: "Together as one." The highlight of the evening was a remote duet between "Seven Seconds" star N'Dour and Coldplay's Chris Martin, who sang "A Sky Full of Stars."

"I never thought in a million years I'd see Youssou sing on a Coldplay track," viewer Awacham tweeted. "I am optimistic, culture is at the beginning and at the end of everything," said N'Dour, sponsor of the evening, which aimed "first to raise awareness of the fight against the pandemic, but also to say that in many areas nothing will ever be the same again". Brazilian artist Carlinhos Brown, Guadeloupean band Kassav' and Jamaica's The Wailers Band, formed by the remaining members of Bob Marley's group, were among other stars taking part. Jamaican reggae and ska legend Jimmy Cliff recorded "a message in these uncertain times". "The time has come again for us Africans to show the world who we are. Those in the continent and in the diaspora, it is time to be together as one," he said.

"We shall overcome"
Other celebrities and personalities including French



A young woman and her child watches the Malian artist, Salif Keita perform on television, at their home in Abidjan.—AFP

actor Omar Sy, former Ghanaian president Jerry Rawlings and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also joined in. "Africa is a continent of rich history, culture uniqueness and dynamism. Africa must rise above this as we have done with every previous challenge," said Rawlings. "Together as one I know we shall overcome and if music is the food of love let us play on." Africa is so far coping with the global health crisis better than expected and has recorded around 115,000 COVID-19 cases and 3,500 deaths.

The pandemic has killed more than 344,000 people worldwide. "How sad to be stuck in the land of joy and good humour," joked French-born Tunisian comedian Samia Orosemane, who is currently in Ivory Coast due to the pandemic. "I would so much have liked to return to Paris where people are fighting for toilet paper," she said. However, the evening sometimes took a more political turn. Benin-born Hollywood actor Djimon Hounsou spoke about the controversy over vaccine trials in Africa. "Time for self-preservation, time to be attentive, time to stay vigilant from any Westerners coming to test their vaccine on us," said the "Blood Diamond" and "Guardians of the Galaxy" star. "Deceit can be powerful but truth is even more powerful," he said. British supermodel Naomi Campbell called for Africans to come together.—AFP

Mexican filmmaker Cuarón backs domestic workers over pay

Oscar-winning Mexican film director Alfonso Cuarón on Tuesday backed calls to ensure thousands of domestic workers laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be paid. "It is our responsibility as employers to pay their wages in this time of uncertainty," said Cuarón, who won the best director Oscar at the 2019 Academy Awards for "Roma." "The objective of this campaign is to remember how important it is to take care of those who care for us and the

respect that the workers deserve," the 58-year-old filmmaker said.

Cuarón, whose film cast a spotlight on Latin America's domestic workers, threw his weight behind a campaign by the Center for Support and Training for Domestic Employees, CACEH. The majority of Mexico's 2.3 million domestic employees live a precarious existence from day to day and have no social security, the organization said. "Thousands of these workers have been left without work or without

wages after the arrival of the coronavirus in this country," it said.

"Many employers have asked them to stop working to protect the health of the family, but have given them no certainty" about continuing payment, the organization said. Mexico, with a population of 120 million, has registered over 71,000 infections and more than 7,600 deaths from the virus—Latin America's highest toll after Brazil.—AFP



In this file photo Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón arrives for the 2019 LACMA Art+Film Gala at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles.—AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Quebec comes to rescue of struggling Cirque du Soleil

The Quebec government on Tuesday offered a conditional loan of US\$200 million to Cirque du Soleil, the world's most famous circus troupe, which is struggling due to the coronavirus pandemic. "I am announcing today that the executive council has granted financial assistance of up to \$200 million for the revival of the circus," said Quebec's economy minister Pierre Fitzgibbon. He noted that an agreement in principle between the province and Cirque's current shareholders — American investment group TPG Capital and China's Fosun Group, as well as the Caisse de depot et placement du Quebec (CDPQ) — had been reached.

Under the agreement, Cirque du Soleil's headquarters will stay in Montreal, and Quebec can potentially buy out the participating shares from the Chinese and

American groups. Cirque du Soleil has been hit hard by the pandemic, which forced it to cancel 44 shows around the world and furlough 4,679 employees, or 95 percent of its staff. Founder Guy Laliberte announced Sunday he intends to try to buy back the troupe. Laliberte, a former stilt-walker-turned-millionaire who co-founded the troupe in 1984, sold his last remaining stake in Cirque in February.

He announced his intention during the popular Radio Canada show "Tout le monde en parle" ("Everybody's talking about it"). "We have a good plan. We think we'll be able to bring back the sacred fire," he said. On Monday, he noted that "it goes without saying, this relaunch will have to be done at the right price... Not at any price." The circus is heavily handicapped by an estimated debt of \$900 million.

Laliberte, who sold most of his shares to Fosun and TPG Capital in a \$1.5 billion deal in 2015, declined to give details on his eventual offer or his partners, saying only he was well-supported. In 2015, TPG Capital acquired a 60 percent majority stake in the troupe, and China's Fosun Group bought a 20 percent stake. Caisse de depot et placement du Quebec (CDPQ), an institutional investment company, bought a 10 percent stake. CDPQ then bought Laliberte's remaining 10 percent stake in February, bringing its total stake to 20 percent. Several groups, including Quebec-based Quebecor, have expressed an interest in an eventual buyout of Cirque du Soleil.—AFP



In this file photo billionaire founder of global acrobatic troupe Cirque du Soleil, Guy Laliberte, arrives at the courthouse of Papeete, French Polynesia, following his indictment on drug charges.—AFP



In this file photo taken on October 12, 2015 French cartoonist and author Albert Uderzo takes part in a press conference in Paris for the release of the Asterix album "Le Papyrus de Cesar" (Caesar's Papyrus). — AFP

Asterix creator who died from virus leaves drawings to hospitals

Four original drawings by the creator of Asterix the Gaul sold Tuesday for nearly 400,000 euros to benefit Paris hospitals. Albert Uderzo, who invented the plucky hero who gleefully took on Roman legions, died from heart failure linked to the coronavirus in March at the age of 92.

His widow Ada said the charity auction was a way of thanking "our new heroes who have resisted the invader," a reference to the virus that has killed more than 28,000 people in France. The four original cartoons sold for 390,000 euros (\$426,000), the auction house Artcurial told AFP.

Uderzo co-created Asterix with scriptwriter Rene Goscinny and kept the epic going after his friend's untimely death in 1977. He went on to create an entire gallery of characters beloved of children and adults across the world. The drawings—which included images from the relatively recent adventures, "Asterix and the Secret Weapon" and "Asterix and Obelix All At Sea"—were donated to the Paris hospitals trust by the artist's widow and daughter.

Ada Uderzo and her daughter Sylvie wanted "to join with whole nation in paying tribute to French hospital staff" for their work during the pandemic, the auction house said. More than 380 million Asterix books have been sold worldwide in 111 languages, with films, television series, video games and a French theme park dedicated to the comic and its characters.—AFP

Italians celebrate lockdown's end with ice cream

Strawberry and chocolate or fig and hazelnut? Italians have been celebrating the end of the coronavirus lockdown with one of their favourite treats: artisanal gelatos. "After a long period spent at home, many have chosen to cool down with an ice cream even during the week, at lunchtime," agriculture group Coldiretti said in a statement. The country's 39,000 gelato shops, which employ 150,000 people and post annual sales of 2.8 billion euros (\$3.1 billion),

were being "saved" by people's desperation to spend time outdoors after almost three months inside.

The sector had "decidedly picked up again" following the economically-crippling nationwide shutdown, it said. Nearly 240 tonnes of ice cream were consumed last weekend in Rome and along the Lazio coastline alone, but cones were being licked up and down the country in cities and seaside resorts alike, it said.

They were helping fight not only lockdown fever

but also stickier than average temperatures, with this year being classified so far as the hottest since records began in 1880, Coldiretti said. A whopping 94 percent of Italians regularly eat ice cream, it said, with seven in 10 preferring it piled on a cone rather than scooped into a little tub. Many like it with freshly-whipped cream on top.—AFP



Maddalena serves ice cream to customers at the Brivido ice cream parlour in the Testaccio district of Rome.—AFP photos

FASHION REVOLUTION AS DESIGNERS REBEL AGAINST 'WASTEFUL' CALENDAR

"Nothing will ever be the same again" has been the constant refrain of the coronavirus era. But for the fashion world that may well be true. Tectonic plates have been shifting inside the industry during the lockdown, with a wave of designers standing up to say that the mad whirl of the fashion circus has to slow.

While many have questioned its frenetic rhythm and wasteful over-production for years, few big-name insiders dared openly to question the hamster wheel of spring/summer, autumn/winter, cruise and pre-fall shows, as well as the now mandatory capsule collections. The first cracks in the facade began to appear last month, when Saint Laurent designer Anthony Vaccarello said he was pulling out of Paris fashion week this year. Henceforth "the brand will lead its own rhythm... and take control of its pace and reshape its schedule," he declared.

'Clothes need longer life'

This week Gucci's Alessandro Michele joined the revolt by saying he was slashing his shows from five to two a year, and questioning the very idea of seasonal collections which have underpinned fashion since World War II. "Clothes should have a longer life," he said in a virtual press conference from Milan, insisting that his future collections would be "seasonless". Michele is no pouting rebel, but fashion's commercially savvy darling who has turned Gucci into a cash cow for the French luxury conglomerate Kering with his ironic kitschy

style that has echoes of Wes Anderson and John Waters films.

And it is not the just the young guns who have had enough. The doyen of designers, Giorgio Armani—still working at age 85 — said it was time to "cut out the superfluous" and rein in fashion's gruelling schedule. "The times that we are living in are turbulent, but they give us a unique chance to see what is not working... to find a more human dimension to it," he said. More significant still has been an open letter initiated by the Belgian master Dries Van Noten and rising French designer Marine Serre calling for a rethinking of how luxury fashion works.

Several hundred industry players have since signed it including brands, creators and department stores like Chloé, Thom Browne, Y/Project, Lemaire, Alexandre Mattiussi, Nordstrom, Bergdorf Goodman, Selfridges and Harvey Nichols. They call for "fundamental change that will simplify businesses, making them more environmentally and socially sustainable" and are now in talks with the organisers of the four big fashion weeks in Paris, Milan, New York and London.

Over-production

Van Noten has also called for an end to the frenzy of discounting and Black Friday-type sales and pleaded for clothes to stay longer in the shops. He wants winter clothes to hit the shops in winter and summer ones in summer, rather than months before as they do

now. "It's not normal to buy winter clothes in May," Van Noten said. Nor was it normal for a collection to be "discounted at 50 percent a month after it hits the floor." He said current retail culture was creating a "vicious circle" of waste and over-production. "After the sales, shops need something new and we are pushed to make more and more collections," he told the French daily Le Monde. "I may be naive, but I think that maybe what happened with gastronomy a few years ago could happen in fashion. We saw the emergence of a wave of restaurants with shorter, seasonal menus that were less ostentatious," Van Noten said.

Serre—who has made a name for herself for up-cycling and reusing material—said fashion should see the coronavirus crisis "as a chance take responsibility" environmentally. "The advantage of being independent is that you are not motivated by money. What matters is the quality of our work," she said. "That makes change possible." Gucci and Saint Laurent are part of Kering, one of two French giants that dominate luxury fashion. But contacted by AFP, it declined to comment on whether it supported the overhaul of the calendar its creators are championing. LVMH, the world's biggest luxury goods group, which owns Louis Vuitton, Dior and a plethora of other labels, has also remained silent.—AFP



In this file photo taken on February 24, 2016 designer Alessandro Michele walks the runway at the end of the show for fashion house Gucci during the Autumn-Winter 2016 / 2017 Milan Fashion Week.



In this file photo taken on June 21, 2018 Belgian designer Dries Van Noten acknowledges the audience at the end of his men's Spring/Summer 2019 collection fashion show in Paris.



In this file photo taken on February 19, 2020 models present creations for Gucci's Women Fall - Winter 2020 collection in Milan.—AFP photos

Marie-Antoinette's travel bag goes for royal ransom

A travel bag belonging to the ill-fated French queen Marie-Antoinette sold for more than five times its estimate in an auction of royal memorabilia near her one-time home at the Palace of Versailles. A large embroidered serviette used during the coronation of the Austrian-born monarch—who lost her head during the French Revolution—also went for several times its estimate. The Osenat auction house said that there had been fierce bidding late Sunday "both in the room, over the telephone and on the internet" for the relics of France's most iconic queen.

The leather travel bag with the studded "Queen's room number 10" inscription went for 43,750 euros (\$47,600), having had an estimate of between 8,000 and 10,000 euros. The damask serviette embroidered with the royal fleurs de lys insignia and leaf crowns with a bouquet of roses at its centre, went for 14,500 euros. Marie-Antoinette had fond memories of the coronation ceremony in Reims cathedral in 1775, writing to her mother in Vienna, "it's an amazing thing to be so well received two months after the revolt" over high bread prices.

Ironically, it was her supposed insistence that the starving peasants eat cake—"Let them eat brioche"—that would later help seal her fate and that of the French monarchy, although there is no evidence that Marie-Antoinette actually said that. A lock of hair from her husband, Louis XVI, who also lost his head on the guillotine, went under the hammer for 4,000 euros. The couple are still regarded as martyr saints to French monarchists, with the king's hair kept inside a medallion of rock crystal in the shape of a heart.—AFP

US writer Joyce Carol Oates wins France's richest book prize

US writer Joyce Carol Oates, so often a bridesmaid for the Nobel literature prize, won France's richest books prize Monday. The Cino del Duca Euro Prize, which is worth 200,000 euros (\$218,000), is often seen as a stepping stone to the Nobel, with Andrei Sakharov, Mario Vargas Llosa and the French novelist Patrick Modiano all winning it before going on to Nobel glory. Five of Oates' books, including her novel "Blonde", which chronicled the inner life of Marilyn Monroe, have been finalists for the Pulitzer Prize, without ever winning.



In this file photo US writer Joyce Carol Oates poses during a photocall at the 36th American Film Festival, in Deauville, northwestern France.—AFP

However, the 81-year-old has won the US National Book Award and a host of other accolades for her more than 60 novels, short story collections, plays and a memoir, "Lost Landscape". Regularly tipped for the Nobel, Oates has been hailed for fearlessly walking into some of the most contentious debates in US society, with her novel, "A Book of American Martyrs", turning on the murder of a doctor in an abortion clinic. An avid Twitter user, she shares pictures of her cats in between frequent digs at US President Donald Trump, who she has branded a "lunatic". "Every day he's setting these little fires all over" while a "more dangerous fire... is corroding away, one by one, the things that we hold dear," she said last year.

The prize is named after an Italian-born businessman, film producer and philanthropist and run by the Institut de France, which includes the Academie Francaise, the guardian of the French language and its official dictionary. It was due to be handed to Oates in Paris next month but the ceremony has been cancelled because of the coronavirus.—AFP

News

Furor after black man dies as white cop kneels on neck

Anger as white woman reports black birdwatcher to police

WASHINGTON: A video of a handcuffed black man dying while a Minneapolis officer knelt on his neck for more than five minutes sparked a fresh furor in the US over police treatment of African Americans Tuesday. Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey fired four police officers following the death in custody of George Floyd on Monday as the suspect was pressed shirtless onto a Minneapolis street, one officer's knee on his neck.

"Your knee in my neck. I can't breathe... Mama. Mama," Floyd pleaded. Bystanders filmed the scene as Floyd, thought to be in his 40s, slowly grew silent and motionless, unable to move even as the officers taunted him to "get up and get in the car". He was taken to hospital where he was later declared dead.

Frey expressed outrage as calls rose for the officers to be prosecuted for murder. "What I saw was wrong at every level," he said of the video. "For five minutes, we watched as a white officer pressed his knee into the neck of a black man," Frey said. "Being black in America should not be a death sentence."

Civil rights attorney Ben Crump said he had been retained by Floyd's family. Crump said in a statement that Floyd had been stopped by police over a forgery accusation, a charge often used for writing bad cheques or using fake banknotes for purchases. "This

abusive, excessive and inhumane use of force cost the life of a man who was being detained by the police for questioning on a non-violent charge," he said. Floyd's death recalled the 2014 choking death of New Yorker Eric Garner by police, who was being detained for illegally selling cigarettes.

His death helped spark the nationwide Black Lives Matter movement. Minneapolis Police Chief Medaria Arradondo said he had passed the case to the FBI for investigation, which could turn it into a federal rights violation case. But there were mounting calls for the officers' arrest on homicide charges. "This is pure evil," tweeted Nekima Levy Armstrong, an African American Minneapolis civil rights attorney. "Those same officers need to be charged and convicted of murder," she said.

Floyd's death comes on the heels of two other deaths of African-Americans that involved police wrongdoing. On March 13 in Louisville, three white Kentucky policemen forced their way into the home of a black woman, Breonna Taylor, and shot her in a drug investigation. And police and prosecutors in Brunswick, Georgia allegedly covered up the killing of a young black jogger by the son of a retired investigator for local law enforcement.

The police allegedly withheld for two months a

video showing Ahmaud Arbery, 25, being followed and then shot with a shotgun in broad daylight. The families of Arbery and Taylor are also being represented by Crump. The American Civil Liberties Union said the Minneapolis case showed that US police continue to use harsh treatment on African Americans accused of minor charges.

"This tragic video shows how little meaningful change has emerged to prevent police from taking the lives of black people," said ACLU policing specialist Paige Fernandez. "Even in places like Minneapolis, where chokeholds are technically banned, black people are targeted by the police for low-level offenses and are subjected to unreasonable, unnecessary violence," she said in a statement.

Separately, a video of a white woman calling the police about a black birdwatcher in New York's Central Park has gone viral, sparking anger about African Americans being falsely reported to cops. The clip, posted on Twitter and viewed 30 million times, was filmed by the man, Christian Cooper, who said he had asked the woman to leash her dog. She was walking the pooch on Monday in a wooded area of the park popular with birdwatchers where dogs are meant to be kept on leads.

As the woman struggles to control the dog, she approaches Cooper and is then seen making a phone call. "I'm going to tell them there's an African-American man threatening my life," she tells Cooper while appearing to dial 911. "There is an African-American man, I'm in Central Park. He's recording me and threatening me and threatening my dog," she then tells the operator.

The exchange prompted outrage on social media, with users calling the woman a "Karen", a term popular online to describe an entitled white woman. New York City mayor Bill de Blasio condemned her actions as "racism, plain and simple". "She called the police BECAUSE he was a Black man. Even though she was the one breaking the rules. She decided he was the criminal and we know why. This kind of hatred has no place in our city," he tweeted.

The woman was identified as Amy Cooper, no relation to the man she argued with. She worked in insurance at investment management company Franklin Templeton. She apologized during an interview with NBC but denied that she was racist, saying she had overreacted after feeling threatened. "I sincerely and humbly apologize to everyone, especially to that man, his family," she said. In a statement posted on Twitter Tuesday, Franklin Templeton said it had fired an employee with immediate effect following an investigation. "We do not tolerate racism of any kind at Franklin Templeton," the company said.

On Facebook, Christian Cooper said he had offered



MINNEAPOLIS: This still image taken from a May 25, 2020 video via Facebook shows a police officer arresting George Floyd. — AFP

the dog a treat after the woman refused his request to leash the dog. "That's when I started video recording with my iPhone, and when her inner Karen fully emerged and took a dark turn," he wrote. — AFP

Religion looms large in Mideast...

Continued from Page 1

Islamic call to prayer, or azan, being heard for the first time in 500 years in Spain, one of the countries worst hit by the pandemic. However, there has been no ban on the azan in Spain in recent times. "In our region, religious claims are sometimes in tension with science and medicine," said Sari Hanafi, professor of sociology at AUB. "But religion is also a main source for social solidarity which is integral to resisting the psychological stress of quarantine."

Beyond religion, AFP fact checkers have also observed a trend of false claims suggesting the collapse of countries in the West as they grapple with the pandemic. A video named "Italians commit suicide" was shared widely on Arabic social media platforms, purporting to show Italians committing mass suicide in a public square because of coronavirus. However, the video – filmed months before the COVID-19 outbreak – actually depicts a protest against the Italian far-right. Social media users also

circulated statements falsely attributed to Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte that only "solutions from the heavens" could save his country.

Dina Matar of the School of Oriental and African Studies in Britain said religious-themed "conspiracy discourse" is not only a regional phenomenon. "We should not construe this in exceptionalist language that the Middle East is different," she told AFP. In the region, and elsewhere, these narratives are "symptomatic of practices that have intentionally invoked religion to legitimize political practices", she said. "Religion has always been used as a political discourse, not only in the Middle East, but in the West as well," she told AFP.

As in other regions, conspiracy discourse does not only focus on religion but also feeds on exaggerated patriotic sentiments, social stigmas and racist stereotypes, according to Hanafi of AUB. Conspiracy theories claiming the coronavirus was created in US bioweapon labs to hit China and Iran, and misleading claims that refugees attract COVID-19 have featured alongside religious-themed posts on social media, the sociologist added. "This kind of disinformation becomes prevalent when we feel powerless in the face of reality and do not know how to explain something scientifically," he said. — AFP

More than 47,000 of Qatar's 2.75 million people have tested positive for the respiratory disease – 1.7 percent of the population – and 28 people have died. Security forces manned checkpoints across Qatar on Sunday to ensure use of the app, local media reported, alongside checking for use of masks. Criticism of the government is rare in Qatar and laws prohibit disrespect towards officials.

However, officials have said that the law on the app will be enforced with "understanding". The app's simple interface displays colored bar-codes containing the user's ID number – green for healthy, red for COVID-19 positive and yellow for quarantined cases. Grey indicates suspected cases or those who have come into contact with infected individuals.

Mohamed bin Hamad Al-Thani, a director at Qatar's health ministry, said that data gathered is "completely confidential". "There will be an update for the Ehteraz app to address the issues of concern and further improve its efficiency," he added in an interview on state television on Thursday. A new version of the software was duly released for Apple and Android on Sunday, promising "minor bug fixes", but without indicating that the invasive aspects had been removed.

A security flaw in the app exposed sensitive information of more than one million users, rights group Amnesty International warned Tuesday. The glitch, which was fixed on Friday after being flagged by Amnesty a day earlier, made users' ID numbers, location and infection status vulnerable to hackers.

"Amnesty International's Security Lab was able to access sensitive information, including people's name, health status and the GPS coordinates of a user's designated confinement location, as the central server did not have security measures in place to protect this data," the rights group said in a statement.

"The Ehteraz app's user privacy and platform security are of the utmost importance," Qatar's health ministry said in a statement on Tuesday. "A comprehensive update of the app was rolled out on Sunday May 24 with expanded security and privacy features for all users."

"There are two key concerns... with the app," said Human Rights Watch researcher Hiba Zayadin. It "is highly invasive, with a range of permissions allowing the government access to things that are not needed for the purpose of contact tracing, permissions that are unnecessary and present a concerning invasion of privacy." But also "many migrant workers in the country don't have compatible phones that would allow them to download the app and comply".

Online reviews have also complained that the app drains battery power and cannot be installed on older iPhone handsets. Some have looked for ways around the policy. "People are spending money and waiting in queues just to get burner phones to protect their privacy," wrote expat engineer Janko on one forum, referring to cheap handsets that could subsequently be disposed of.

There have been reports of a few users being wrongly classified as "quarantined" or "suspected cases". "There's no need for photo access and other things. But it could be a good tool. It is a good way to prioritize whom to test," technology lawyer Rahul Matthan told AFP. But "to work, they need a large number of people to use it. If people are dissuaded because of the app's overreach, then that would be a worry." — AFP

Dubai puts tech to test; backlash...

Continued from Page 1

Police wear smart helmets that take the temperature of passers-by while laboratories make protective masks using 3D printers.

When a night-time curfew begins, Dubai residents – 90 percent of whom are expats – receive a reminder message on their mobile phone in Arabic, English or other languages. The UAE has regularly announced research advances into the COVID-19 illness, developing several apps to help manage the pandemic.

One of them, Alhoshn, which the government has encouraged residents to download, helps track people who are infected with the virus or who may have come in close contact with confirmed cases. But the use of technology to fight the pandemic has raised concern across the world over government surveillance and privacy risks. Tech experts and the media have highlighted this issue in the UAE, where some foreign websites and applications are already blocked.

But Sharif pushed back against skepticism. "Dubai and the Emirates respect privacy, whether it is a question of patient records or smart applications", he said. The emirate was creating its "own model" of responding to the health crisis, Sharif added, though authorities were also looking at countries such as South Korea, seen as a positive policy response to the crisis. "We must follow the developments... but also add to them," he said.

Meanwhile, privacy concerns over Qatar's coronavirus contact tracing app, a tool that is mandatory on pain of prison, have prompted a rare backlash and forced officials to offer reassurance and concessions. Like other governments around the world, Qatar has turned to mobile phones to trace people's movements and track who they come into contact with, allowing officials to monitor coronavirus infections and alert people at risk of contagion.

The apps use Bluetooth radio signals to "ping" nearby devices, which can be contacted subsequently if a user they have been near develops symptoms or tests positive, but the resultant unprecedented access to users' location data has prompted fears about state surveillance.

Qatar's version goes considerably further – it forces Android users to permit access to their picture and video galleries, while also allowing the app to make unprompted calls. "I can't understand why it needs all these permissions," wrote Ala'a on a Facebook group popular with Doha's large expat community – one of several such forums peppered with concerns over the app. Justin Martin, a journalism professor based in Qatar, warned authorities in a tweet not to "erode" trust by enforcing "an app with such alarming permissions".

The government launched the "Ehteraz" app, meaning "precaution", in April and on Friday it became mandatory for all citizens and legal residents to install it on their phones. Non-compliance is punishable by up to three years in jail – the same term as for failing to wear a mask in public – in a state battling one of the world's highest per capita infection rates.

Israel Lebanon pullout inspires...

Continued from Page 1

Also popular for its social services helping the poor, it continues to leverage the memory of this era to mold a new generation of loyalists gearing up to join its regional operations. "We all wish we were there standing beside (Hezbollah) during the liberation war," Jalal told AFP over the phone, asking to use a pseudonym. We wish we had been "fighting on their side and offering ourselves for our country," said the young man, whose brother has since fought with Hezbollah in neighboring Syria.

Bashir Saade, author of a book on Hezbollah, said "the party always needs to jump back into the past... to make sense of its political presence and vision". The main site where Hezbollah celebrates its historical legacy is a memorial and museum in the hilltop bastion of Mleeta, built in 2010 to commemorate Israel's withdrawal. At the former Hezbollah launchpad for operations, an Israeli Merkava tank is displayed in a pit with its barrel twisted into a knot, next to a mock grave for Israeli soldiers.

Under oak trees, a mannequin representing a Hezbollah fighter in military fatigues lies on a stretcher with a cast around his neck, while two similar figurines are seen carrying a heavy case of equipment. Below them, visitors can walk through a 200 m long tunnel that Hezbollah fighters built over three years to combat Israeli forces.

"The objective of the museum is to give the coming generations tangible proof of what happened," said tour guide Mohammad Lamah. It shows them that "the struggle is worth it", he said. But unlike most memorial landmarks, he said, the former Hezbollah outpost does not "immortalize a resolved case". On

Biden in stark contrast with...

Continued from Page 1

The mask itself has emerged as a political flashpoint. Polling shows women, who are tilting towards Biden, strongly favor social distancing measures and mask-wearing. By contrast, Trump is heavily supported by blue-collar white men, and "they regard the mask as a sign of weakness," University of Virginia political science professor Larry Sabato said.

As the country approaches the dreadful milestone of 100,000 deaths caused by COVID-19, and with some 38.6 million Americans made jobless by the crisis, Trump is intensifying his push to jumpstart the US economy. "States should open up ASAP," Trump tweeted Tuesday. He went on the

the other side of the border, "Israel is still here".

Israel's pullout from Lebanon was celebrated as a major achievement both inside Lebanon and across the Arab world, gaining Hezbollah regional acclaim. Its popularity further surged among supporters after it fought a 33-day war against Israeli forces in Lebanon in 2006. Hezbollah has since evolved into a regional Iran-backed military force, operating in Syria and supporting groups in Yemen and Iraq, leading some to criticize it for turning its guns away from Israel and towards fellow Arabs.

Hezbollah is today the only Lebanese group not to have disarmed after the country's 1975-1990 civil war and commands a military arsenal that rivals that of Lebanon's own US-backed army. At home, cross-sectarian support for the group dwindled after an armed fiasco with fellow Lebanese during a political crisis in 2008.

Nonetheless Hezbollah, which entered the political scene after Israel's withdrawal, has become a dominant political player in Lebanon. Together with its allies it commands a majority in parliament and the cabinet. The movement also runs a TV channel and an extensive social services network – complete with schools, hospitals and charitable organizations.

Since 2006, Hezbollah and Israel have avoided all-out conflict, but Israel routinely targets Hezbollah positions in Syria. Both sides have exchanged sporadic gunfire and endless threats, but analysts say a new conflict is not in the interest of either side. But if there were a return to full hostilities, the 2000 Israeli pullout would likely provide inspiration for many young Hezbollah loyalists.

"I was young on the day of liberation and didn't understand what was going on, but I understood from my parents that it was something great," another Hezbollah supporter, aged 24, told AFP by phone. "It is now the ambition of every one of us to take up arms to defend the oppressed," he said. — AFP

attack last weekend, firing off blistering tweets against Biden and other critics, promoting debunked conspiracies and warning that mail-in ballots will lead to a "rigged election", the latter earning him an "unsubstantiated" flag by Twitter.

On Tuesday, Trump questioned why Biden would wear a mask outdoors, in "perfect conditions, perfect weather", while he does not wear a mask in his home with his wife. "So I thought it was very unusual that he had one on," Trump said at the White House. Biden argued that "this macho stuff" – Trump refusing to wear a mask in public, barefaced Americans demonstrating for states to immediately re-open – "cost people's lives".

Trump is gambling that his call to swiftly end lockdowns will win over undecided voters. But May polling has shown that a majority of Americans worry that states are opening too quickly. Meanwhile on Tuesday, Biden won the endorsement of the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest collection of labor unions. — AFP

Stars

Daily SuDoku

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easy

Sunday's Solution

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

STAR TRACK

Aries (March 21-April 19)

The last months have been very challenging?and there's a very good chance that you're no longer up to meeting challenges. If you've been yearning to modify something in your daily life, do it now, Aries. The hour has come to make concrete changes. Regardless of whether the change is personal or professional, physical or emotional, don't be afraid to seriously upset your life.

Libra (September 23-October 22)

To understand the major shift that's taking place, Libra, look at events from a lofty perspective. A slow-acting liberation is gathering momentum. In the next seven months, you'll be unable to resist the opportunity to jettison some oppressive part of your past. You'll shed your old complexes and emerge renewed. Don't be alarmed if some family relations suffer as a result. The distress is only temporary.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)

A change has occurred in our solar system, Taurus, a shift that will probably be imperceptible but nonetheless profound. You have seven months to understand how this change will impact you. It will soon dawn on you that you feel a strong need for liberation. Perhaps you need to release yourself from the bonds of a group or change your career. Innovation is in the air!

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

The gentle winds of change are blowing through your world at the moment, Scorpio. You have a feeling of newness and an open attitude toward what's happening out there. Even the bad news has a silver lining if you know where to look. Certain events will be coming up to give you the impression that you're advancing in a concrete manner toward a new life. You can expect some pleasant surprises.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)

You mustn't expect any enormous changes today, Gemini. However, the process you began three or four years ago is accelerating slightly. Something is shifting deep within your very identity, leading you to wonder about the ideas that make you sure of who you are. Your family, background, and education no longer count as much as your spiritual foundations. Don't be afraid of this shift. Go with it.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

The idea of a turning point in one's destiny often brings a cynical smile to some people's faces, but in your case, Sagittarius, it definitely has some meaning. This turning point can take the form of a new person in your life or a key event that could change your world forever. Sometimes things that we only hear about actually happen to us. Be open to this kind of revelation in the coming months.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)

The day should be fairly positive, Cancer, and you'll begin to feel the faintest hints of a major change beginning. This new phase will last seven months. As it progresses, you'll find greater freedom of expression. Expect to shift into high gear in subjects you used to avoid. Some friction with siblings is likely to arise in the next few months. You're all big enough to handle it!

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

You may feel as if you've returned deeply changed from a long voyage, Capricorn. Of course, nobody's going anywhere these days, but you can still take inner journeys while sheltering in place, and change can be truly profound. You may have some problems getting back into the life you had before you left. Your old life is likely to feel too limiting to you. So what are you waiting for? Change it!

Leo (July 23-August 22)

The solar system is shifting gears today, Leo, and it's liable to trigger a great transformation that will last seven months. This change will center on how you define fulfillment in both your career and your love life. If you're starting to feel hemmed in by your training or upbringing, you can expect to seek liberation from these inhibitions in the months to come.

Aquarius (January 20- February 18)

If you feel suffocated by a romantic relationship that lacks some spice or feels too traditional, then why not liberate yourself? There is a feeling in the air that life is turning in a positive direction. This will help you set things up to turn even your craziest ideas into reality. Starting today, Aquarius, you'll be asked to back up your words with actions. You'll look a lot more credible when you take care of yourself.

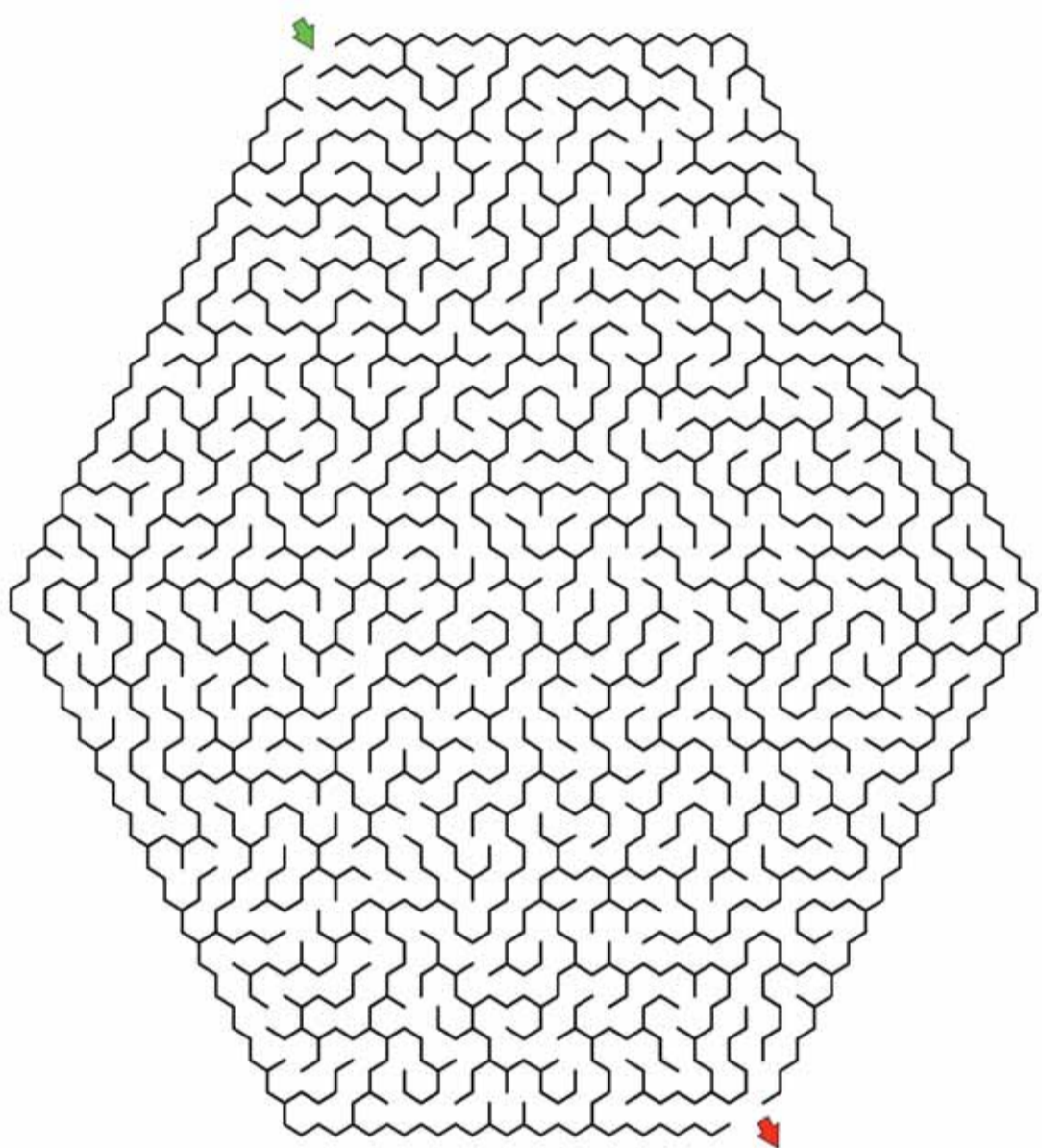
Virgo (August 23-September 22)

It's an excellent forecast for you, Virgo! Although nothing specific might happen today, you'll discover a huge promise of freedom over the next seven months. A fundamental shift is about to occur in your occupation and love life. As the months unfold, expect to be more visionary, more creative, and perhaps more rebellious. This time, you'll be much more effective than in the past two or three years.

Pisces (February 19-March 20)

During the last few months, Pisces, it could be that you've met some people who have greatly influenced your attitude about marriage or partnership. They've been pushing you to get more freedom into your life. If so, you may get a sense that the universe is trying to tell you something. That's no reason for you to agree with their specific message, however. Freedom or lack of freedom is completely subjective.

Find the way



Join the dots



Word Search

Memorial Day
Last Monday in May

S	M	N	S	C	O	M	M	E	M	O	R	A	T	E	R	B
S	A	A	E	J	W	P	L	A	I	R	O	M	E	M	S	E
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AMERICAN ANTHEM CEMETERY CEREMONY COMMEMORATE DECORATION FALLEN FLAGS FLOWERS

FREEDOM GRAVE HALF MAST HEROES HOLIDAY HONOR MAY MEMORIAL OBSERVANCE

PATRIOTIC REMEMBRANCE SACRIFICE SALUTE SERVICE SOLDIERS TAPS VETERANS WAR

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Sports

Photo of the day



MUNICH: Cody Chapman performs at Munich Mash 2019 Red Bull Roller Coaster in Munich, Germany. —Photo taken from www.redbullcontentpool.com

Thorpe, one of greatest US athletes of all time

NEW YORK: Jim Thorpe, a two-time Olympic gold medalist and formidable American football and baseball player, was one of the greatest US athletes of all time but the public often failed to recognise him as one of their own during his lifetime.

Thorpe was born on May 28, 1888 (though some reports have him born on May 22 while others put the year as 1887) on Sac and Fox Nation land in Oklahoma to parents who were each half American Indian and half Caucasian.

American Indians were not considered US citizens when Thorpe, already a two-time All-American running back under coach Pop Warner at Carlisle, won the right to compete on the U.S. Team at the 1912 Games in Stockholm.

At the Games he took gold in the pentathlon and then in the final event of the Games, the decathlon, set an Olympic record, leading King Gustav V of Sweden to call him "the greatest athlete in the world".

Yet when Thorpe returned to the United States he was barred from some hotels and restaurants, especially in the South, while travelling with his teams because of his race.

"He dealt with adversity his whole life," Justin Lenhart, museum curator for the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame, told Reuters.

"Thorpe's legacy is perseverance. He wasn't a perfect man ... but he also accomplished a lot under some really tough circumstances."

Despite the obstacles he faced in everyday life, Thorpe dazzled on whatever field he played. In 1913, Thorpe signed with baseball's New York Giants and would go on to play six MLB seasons, posting a career .252 batting average. But his bigger impact came playing his favourite sport, American football.

He joined the Canton Bulldogs in 1915 and led them to three championships and was named an NFL All-Pro in 1923. He was later inducted into the Hall of Fame for both collegiate and professional football.

After his playing career, Thorpe struggled to find work during the Great Depression and ended up going to Hollywood, where he played bit parts in Westerns. —Reuters

NBA, MLB, NFL union bosses expect returns but none set

Safety remains major concern for those who will risk their health to play

NEW YORK: NBA, NFL and Major League Baseball players union leaders say it's likely the leagues they deal with will return in some fashion this year after being shut down for the coronavirus pandemic.

But nothing is settled for any of the three biggest North American sports leagues and "certainty" on safety issues remains a major concern for those who will risk their health to play while trying to avoid contracting the virus.

NFL Players Association executive director DeMaurice Smith, National Basketball Players Association executive director Michele Roberts and MLB Players Association executive director Tony Clark expressed confidence in a conference call with HBO for interviews airing today.

Asked to rank the chances for leagues to return in 2020 from 1-10 with 10 being certain of a comeback, Clark gave the MLB's chances an 8 1/2 with Roberts saying 6 for the NBA and Smith giving the NFL a 6-7 range.

"It was probably an eight last week," Roberts said when the session was staged last Thursday. "I've gotten some recent concerns expressed by players now that babies (and) children have been infected, so heightened concerns have come into the conversation."

Roberts told ESPN in a report Tuesday that NBA players overwhelmingly want to resume the season but "need some level of certainty" regarding COVID-

19 safeguard issues.

"It's time," Roberts told ESPN. "It has been 2 1/2 months of 'What if?' My players need some level of certainty. I think everybody does."

The NBA, whose players are conducting individual workouts at team facilities where allowed, is exploring a plan to resume the season in late July at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, although final details have yet to be determined.

Roberts plans to speak with players from every team before the end of May. "Our guys need to know," Roberts said. "Certainty will be good. But the players really want to play."

The MLBPA's Clark had more confidence than his counterparts but still needed answers to some major issues. "I remain optimistic," Clark said. "We don't know everything we want to know and how things are continuing to change, but I do remain optimistic we'll get back out there and play."

NFLPA EYES OTHER UNIONS

The NFL has announced a full schedule to commence September 10 but all eyes will be on what moves the other leagues and unions make before the NFL is scheduled to launch its season.

Smith said the NFL's chances of playing could hinge on how other sports perform. "A lot depends on what happens with the other sports. And to say that we aren't looking at what's going to be happen-

“
Players
really want
to play
”



WASHINGTON: File photo shows Michele Roberts, executive director of the National Basketball Players Association testifies before the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee on Capitol Hill on December 2, 2014. NBA players overwhelmingly want to resume the 2019-20 season but "need some level of certainty" in a comeback plan, players' union executive director Michele Roberts said. —AFP

ing in basketball and baseball... I'd be lying to you if we're not," he said.

NBA team owners plan a conference call Friday that could reveal more details about COVID-19 safeguards and a full return plan. Roberts said the union would not necessarily need to vote upon any

comeback strategy from the league.

"If we thought we needed a vote, we would," Roberts said. "But our preferred method is talking to people or just having them talk to us. Then if we get a sense of what the sentiment is, then we can move forward. We talk to our players and figure it out." —AFP

McIlroy hopes Ryder Cup will be moved to 2021

LONDON: Rory McIlroy believes the Ryder Cup will be moved back to 2021 under pressure from players to not lose the unique atmosphere of the biennial event behind closed doors.

The coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on the golfing calendar with the three US-based majors moved to later in the year and the British Open cancelled.

The Ryder Cup is still scheduled to take place from September 25-27 in Wisconsin, but spectators would almost certainly not be allowed to attend if it did go ahead.

"I think the majority of players would like to see it pushed back until 2021 so that they can play in front of the atmosphere they want to play," McIlroy told BBC Northern Ireland.

"They want to play in front of crowds, that makes the Ryder Cup so special." At

the end of the day the players are the ones that make the Ryder Cup and if they don't want to play then there isn't a Ryder Cup.

"I see it being pushed back to 2021 and honestly I think that would be the right call," European Ryder Cup captain Padraig Harrington has previously warned his players that they may have to sacrifice the thrill of playing in front of big crowds for the good of golf fans watching at home.

"The players don't want it but we might have to take one for the world of team sport and put an event on that people can watch," said Harrington earlier this month.

"It wouldn't be the same for us but we're craving sport on TV," McIlroy is facing a busy end to the year with the PGA Tour set to return from June 11. The PGA Championship, US Open and Masters will follow in August, September and November respectively, but McIlroy is still disappointed the Open was not also rescheduled.

"I was just as disappointed as everyone else that The Open got cancelled this year," he added. "I think it would have been a good date in September if we were able to play it." —AFP

Cuban proposes NBA regular-season restart

DALLAS: While the NHL is preparing to restart its season by leaving off seven of its 31 teams, Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban wants all of the NBA's 30 teams to be in action when basketball resumes.

Cuban wants each team to return for five to seven regular-season games, setting up a 20-team post-season that would include a six-team play-in tournament.

The emphasis on resuming the regular season is tied to the point at which the NBA's regular season was suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic. When play was halted on March 11 after Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert tested positive for COVID-19, NBA teams had played between 63 and 67 games of their 82-game schedule.

According to multiple media reports, TV contracts require teams to play at least 70 regular-season games. The restarted regular season would give teams just outside of the current post-

season cutoff another chance to sneak into the field. And with 10 spots available from each conference, Cuban pointed out to ESPN that all but two teams, the Minnesota Timberwolves and Golden State Warriors, would have a chance to make the playoffs under his proposal.

Once the 20 positions are filled, the teams would be ranked by record regardless of conference, and the top 14 would be assured of making the standard, 16-team playoff bracket.

The play-in event would begin with No. 17 opposing No. 20, and with No. 18 opposing No. 19. The winner of those matchups, which might be either one game or a best-of-three, would then advance to face Nos. 15 and 16 in best-of-five series, Cuban said, according to NBC Sports.

Once the field is down to the usual 16 teams, the playoffs would continue in the traditional format, with remaining rounds all best-of-seven.

"It's fair. It's entertaining," Cuban told ESPN. Cuban told NBC Sports' Mike Tirico. "I want to change things around. You know me, I'm a mover and a shaker. I want to experiment."

"(This plan) gives us a chance to have some more playoff games, some more excitement, some more meaningful games. That gives almost every team a chance when we come back for whatever's going to be left of our regular season to do something interesting and compete for something."

"I think we gotta change it up some. We can't just go the tried and true way." The proposal could wind up hurting Cuban's own team, as the Mavericks currently are in seventh place in the Western Conference. —Reuters

The NBA announced Saturday that it is in discussions with The Walt Disney Company about a late-July restart at Disney's ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex near Orlando. —Reuters

Sports

NHL to restart with 24-team playoff in two hub cities

Extensive testing must be available on wide-scale basis

NEW YORK: The National Hockey League announced Tuesday it will abandon the rest of the regular season and proceed directly to a 24-team playoff staged in two hub cities.

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said the revised schedule would "produce a worthy Stanley Cup champion" after a season that has been put on hold by the coronavirus pandemic.

However Bettman offered no fixed date on when play would resume, while the two cities due to host the playoffs were also yet to be decided. Formal training camps won't open until July 1 at the earliest, he added.

The NHL season has been on pause since March 12 due to the COVID-19 outbreak, and all players currently remain under league-mandated quarantine.

Bettman said 10 cities are in the running for the two hub centers, including seven from the US: Chicago, Columbus, Dallas, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh. The three Canadian cities are Toronto, Vancouver and Edmonton.

Bettman said the league had drawn up a long-list of candidate cities in order to retain scheduling flexibility.

"We didn't want to get locked in. We don't want to go to a place where there is a lot of COVID-19 or we don't want to go to a place where we can't get the testing we need," he said.

"There is going to be extensive testing. It must be available on wide-scale basis without obstructing local needs."



Training camps won't open soon

BORDER SNAG

Although three Canadian cities are in the running, Bettman later told reporters that unless Canada lifts mandatory 14-day quarantine rules, the NHL will not be heading north of the US border.

"We don't need to make a decision today. We'll probably need to make one in three to four weeks, and at that point we would be able to better evaluate how COVID-19 is in a particular place," Bettman said.

He reiterated earlier reports that the playoff format would begin with best-of-five series, but the Stanley Cup final would be the traditional best-of-seven. "We anticipate playing into the late summer and early fall," he said.

Under the proposed schedule, the top four seeds in each conference would play a round robin tournament for first-round seedings.

The top four seeds in the Eastern Conference hub city would be the Boston Bruins, Tampa Bay Lightning, Washington Capitals and Philadelphia Flyers.

The top four Western Conference teams would be the St. Louis Blues, Colorado Avalanche, Vegas Golden Knights and Dallas Stars.

The other 16 teams in both conferences would play in a best-of-five first round. The rest of the bracketed playoff format for the Eastern Conference would have Pittsburgh (5) vs. Montreal (12), Carolina (six) vs. New York Rangers (11), the New York Islanders (seven) vs. Florida (10) and Toronto (eight) vs. Columbus (nine).



MISSOURI: File photo shows Commissioner Gary Bettman speaks to the media prior to the 2020 NHL All-Star Skills Competition at Enterprise Center in St Louis, Missouri. NHL announced on May 26, 2020, it will abandon the rest of the regular season and go straight into a conference-based playoff format with 24 teams competing in two hub cities. —AFP

The Western matchups are Edmonton (5) vs. Chicago (12), Nashville (six) vs. Arizona (11), Vancouver (seven) vs. Minnesota (10) and Calgary (eight) vs. Winnipeg (nine).

Games will be played behind closed doors without fans in the buildings. While the players and the NHL have agreed on a format, the NHL Players' Association has not formally approved any actual return to finish the season.

Bettman said the league and clubs will combine to spend millions of dollars conducting up to 30,000 tests for the players, coaches, officials and staff.

"You just do the math," he said. "Our medical advisors tell us that by the time we are doing this over the summer, it will be a relatively insignificant number relative to the number of tests that will be available." —AFP

Little ball boy saves the day for Kvitova

PRAGUE: A little ball boy peeking from behind a fence gave Petra Kvitova the only touch of the fan support she misses at a Prague tournament played behind closed doors on Tuesday.

"It was after I played a decent passing shot down the line," said Kvitova, after she beat doubles specialist Barbora Krejčíková in straight sets.

"I ended up near the fence and he said 'nice one!' to me. So I answered: 'Thank you,'" the two-time Wimbledon champion chuckled.

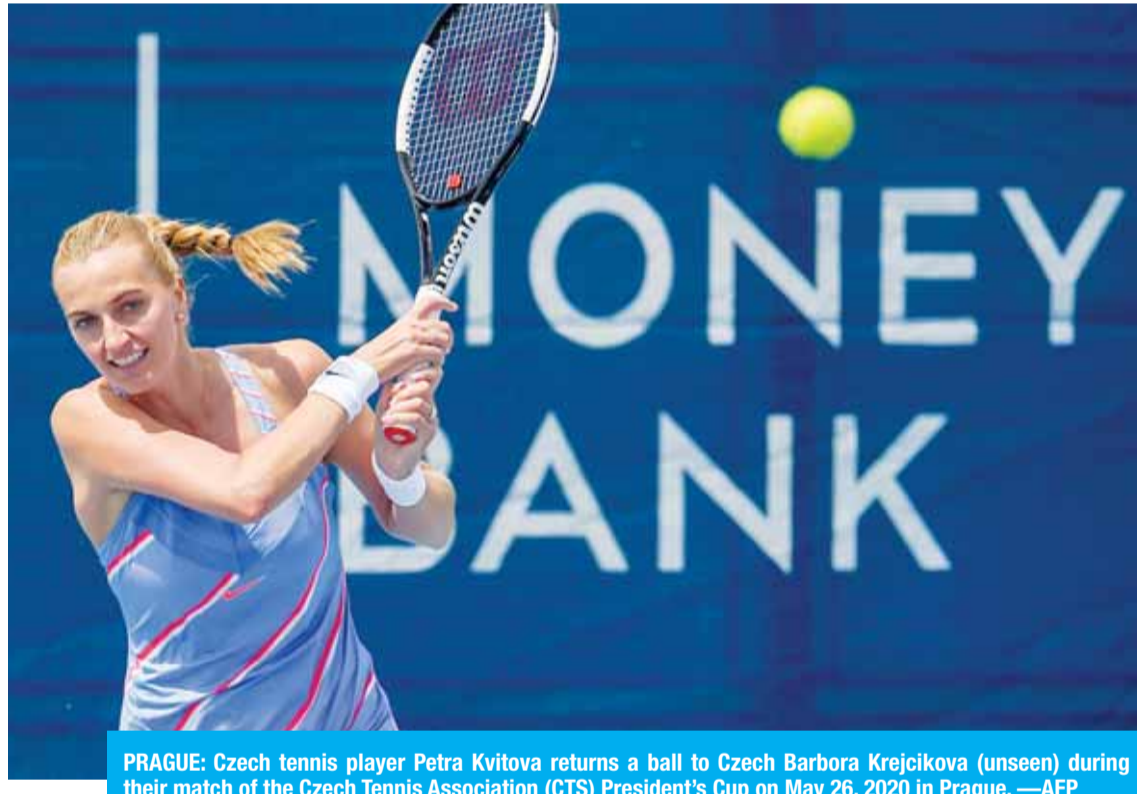
But she conceded it felt "very weird" to play without an audience at the tournament marked by strict hygienic measures designed to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

"The audience is crucial, it's an engine for me," said the 30-year-old world number 12.

"It feels very strange. I thought I might cheer for myself quite a few times or say something aloud and then I decided not to," she said of the rather solemn atmosphere.

Her two friends sitting by the court called on her to "tear" a few times, while her coach limited himself to just a few subdued "pojd" ("come on"), which is Kvitova's trademark cheer.

"I thought at least the coach could clap for me



PRAGUE: Czech tennis player Petra Kvitova returns a ball to Czech Barbora Krejčíková (unseen) during their match of the Czech Tennis Association (CTS) President's Cup on May 26, 2020 in Prague. —AFP

and it didn't happen. It was really weird," said Kvitova. And, recalling the ball boy moment, she

added: "It was a good shot. Normally I would have yelled." —AFP

Serie A meeting govt to discover fate of season

MILAN: Serie A hopes of following Germany and Spain back onto the pitch will be decided today during a meeting with the Italian government which will determine the fate of the season in football-mad Italy.

Sports Minister Vincenzo Spadafora will tell Italian football federation and Lega Serie A bosses if the health conditions are right to return after nearly three months.

The Italian season has been on hold since March 9 amid the coronavirus pandemic which has killed almost 33,000 people in the country.

Football clubs returned to group training on May 19 but competitive action remains suspended until mid-June. Indications are that Spadafora and the government's Scientific Technical Committee will agree to both the health protocol proposed

and to start the season again.

In the case of a favourable decision today, Lega Serie A have scheduled a meeting for Friday morning to examine "the different calendar hypotheses" for the remaining Serie A and Italian Cup matches.

Lega Serie A bosses want competition to resume on the weekend of June 13-14, starting with four postponed fixtures — Atalanta-Sassuolo, Verona-Cagliari, Inter Milan-Sampdoria and Torino-Parma.

They hope the season would resume fully on June 20, with the goal of awarding the league title, defining promotions and relegations, before playing Italian Cup semi-finals, with the final in early August.

The closing stages of the European club competitions could also be played in August. Three Italian clubs are still in the Champions League and two in the Europa League.

'RISKING SAFETY'

But not everyone agrees with a return to the pitch and the packed schedule required with teams needing to play three matches a week, in hot

summer conditions.

Brescia and Torino, situated in the northern regions of Lombardy and Piedmont respectively, which accounted for nearly 60 percent of Italy's COVID-19 deaths, have consistently opposed to a return.

"To finish this championship is forcing it in my opinion," Brescia captain Daniele Gastaldello said this week. "It's risking the safety of the players." Brescia are sitting last in the league, and have nothing to gain by concluding this nightmare season.

Torino president Urbano Cairo, whose club are 15th, would also gladly abandon the season. "I bow to the majority choice," said Cairo, voicing his concerns over "the short time between the end of this season and the start of the next one," scheduled for September 1.

AC Milan's Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic, one of the big stars of the championship, has already suffered a calf injury in training, and could be out for a month.

"I think it's chaos," said Italy coach Roberto Mancini. "If I were to speak only as a coach, I would prefer it to

stop and start calmly next season.

"There is going to be an endless series of matches and I don't know what state the players will be in." On Friday, the 'Plan B' will also be analysed at the Lega Serie A meeting, a format with short playoffs to determine the title, European places and relegation, if the season is again suspended, or all the matches not played.

Another issue to be solved is that of players' contracts and whether they can be extended to complete the season beyond its natural expiration.

The issue of wage cuts also remains unresolved and liability in the event of illness remains complex. But one team who have been anxious to return to the pitch are Lazio.

The Roman club were just one point behind leaders Juventus when the season was suspended, and within touching distance of the third Scudetto in the club's 120-year history.

"We miss football, I don't speak only for myself or for our team. We hope that the right decision can be made soon to complete this championship," said captain Senad Lulic. —AFP

German top-flight is the only top-level game on the planet and football fans everywhere are watching.

After scoring the only goal as Bayern won a crunch match in Dortmund, Joshua Kimmich displaced Donald Trump as the top-trending subject on Twitter in the US.

Cue Bayern veteran Mueller smiling and joking as he reached out to international viewers with a post-match interview in almost faultless English.

Mueller is known in his own country as an interviewee with a sense of humour.

After the victory, he beamed as he faced a microphone and happily showed off his German

sense of humour as he talked about the length of Roman Buerki's arms and compared teenage teammate Alphonso Davies to the Roadrunner, complete with sound effects.

Mueller described Kimmich's game-winning lob over home keeper Buerki as "having a long hang time" while miming watching the ball pass over his head. "I had a good feeling," he said.

"Roman Buerki is a great keeper but one of his strengths is that he is maybe one of two steps outside his goal because maybe he has not got the longest arms so with these one of two steps he tries to have a better angle and Joshua saw that." —AFP

A's, Dodgers cut employees' salaries amid pandemic

LOS ANGELES: The Los Angeles Dodgers and Oakland A's announced cost-cutting moves Tuesday in response to baseball's ongoing shutdown amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The Dodgers announced that they are cutting employees' salaries in an effort to avoid furloughs and "to preserve hundreds of jobs." The A's, meanwhile, announced that they are furloughing front-office staffers and scouts, and they are cutting off salary payments for minor-league players effective June 1. The team had been paying minor-leaguers \$400 per week, according to multiple media reports.

Oakland team owner John Fisher wrote in a statement posted on the team's farm system Twitter account, "Baseball is more than a job — it is a way of life. People who work for our team are our family — our very foundation — and they work tirelessly to help the A's compete in this most precious game. COVID-19 has brought a tragic loss of life and sickness to so many in our community, and it has impacted us all in ways we could have never imagined. Our organization, like so many others across the country, has had to make tough and painful decisions."

A's general manager David Forst wrote in an email to the organization's minor-leaguers, "This was a difficult decision and it's one that comes at a time when a number of our full-time employees are also finding themselves either furloughed or facing a reduction in salary for the remainder of the season. For all of this, I am sorry."

While the Dodgers did not release financial specifics of their salary cuts, multiple media outlets reported that the team is making tiered pay reductions for everyone earning at least \$75,000 per year, with the highest-salaried workers facing larger cuts.

The Dodgers said in a statement, "The Coronavirus has caused grave health issues as well as widespread financial hardships for many people and also for businesses. The virus also has created uncertainty regarding the 2020 MLB season. The entire Dodgers' organization, including the great many people who work to bring you games and the experience of being in the park, face unprecedented challenges, as do so many others."

"Over the last several weeks, we have considered every way to better withstand the challenges presented by the virus. Today — while we remain very hopeful that there will be a 2020 season — we are implementing a number of measures to reduce our costs. We remain ready to play as soon as that becomes feasible."

"These measures include salary reductions for all (exempt) employees above a certain salary threshold, with higher paid employees taking a larger share of the reductions. This plan allows us to avoid organization-wide furloughs and to preserve hundreds of jobs."

Major League Baseball halted spring training in mid-March due to the pandemic, and plans to start the season remain uncertain. Among other issues, the teams and the players union are at odds over salaries for a potentially shortened season. —Reuters

Bayern's Mueller turns on charm in English

BERLIN: There might be no fans in the stadiums but the Bundesliga knows the world is watching and on Tuesday Bayern Munich's Thomas Mueller was part of its charm offensive.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic the

18 NBA, MLB, NFL union bosses expect returns but none set



19 NHL to restart with 24-team playoff in two hub cities



19 Little ball boy saves the day for Kvitova



Bayern Munich down Dortmund

Takes a huge step towards eighth straight Bundesliga title



DORTMUND: Dortmund's German forward Julian Brandt (C) vies for the ball with (L-R) Bayern Munich's Canadian midfielder Alphonso Davies, Bayern Munich's German forward Thomas Mueller, Bayern Munich's French defender Benjamin Pavard and Bayern Munich's German defender Jerome Boateng during the German first division Bundesliga football match BVB Borussia Dortmund v FC Bayern Munich. — AFP

BERLIN: Joshua Kimmich described his winning goal as "brutally important" after Bayern Munich took a huge step towards an eighth straight Bundesliga title on Tuesday with a 1-0 win at Borussia Dortmund to leave them seven points clear at the top with just six games left.

Kimmich's brilliant effort came just before half-time behind closed doors at Signal Iduna Park as hosts Dortmund missed the chance to turn up the heat on the Bavarians without the backing of their huge support.

"It was brutally important: I looked around to see if everyone understood how important it was," Kimmich said of his deft chip.

Kimmich's captain Manuel Neuer echoed the defensive midfielder's thoughts.

"That was a very important sign," said Neuer. Bayern won 4-0 when the teams met in Munich in November and they kept up their excellent recent record against second-placed Dortmund.

"Now only Bayern can decide what happens," said frustrated Dortmund captain Mats Hummels.

"Sometimes, games are decided by brilliant mo-

ments and that was the case today." Dortmund's star teenage striker, Erling Braut Haaland, who had scored ten goals in as many league games, failed to make an impact against Bayern's watertight defence before going off injured in the second half.

Jerome Boateng and David Alaba gave him no room, while Kimmich and Leon Goretzka in midfield made sure passes intended for him rarely met their mark. The Norway forward limped off with 20 minutes left after a heavy tackle from Boateng.

Things might have been different, with Haaland coming close inside the first minute with an attempt that went through the legs of Bayern goalkeeper Manuel Neuer but was kicked off the line by Boateng.

At the other end, Lukasz Piszczek cleared a Serge Gnabry shot inches from the line, while moments later Dortmund goalkeeper Roman Buerki denied Kingsley Coman. Bayern were in control, and Kimmich

grabbed what proved to be the winner two minutes before half-time when he chipped Buerki from 20 yards. It was the Germany international's third league goal from outside the box this season.

In an attempt to turn the game around, Dortmund coach Lucien Favre brought on midfield enforcer Emre Can at the start of the second half and added the pace of Jadon Sancho on the wing.

The home side had a shout for a penalty just before the hour mark when a Haaland shot was deflected wide by the arm of Boateng, but nothing was given.

Shortly after, Haaland limped off to be replaced by 17-year-old Giovanni Reyna.

In the dying stages, Favre brought on 2014 World Cup winner Mario Goetze, who is out of contract next month and set to leave, in the vain hope of grabbing an equaliser. With time running out, Bayern striker Robert Lewandowski hit the post.

The league's top scorer then had a strong appeal for a late penalty waved away after a push in the area by Dortmund defender Manuel Akanji. But the roars of celebration at the end came from the Bayern bench and echoed around the near-empty stadium.

Elsewhere, Bayer Leverkusen dropped to fifth after being routed 4-1 at home by Wolfsburg, whose defender Marin Pongracic claimed two goals.

It was a shock defeat at home for Peter Bosz-coached Leverkusen who had won their previous 12 games. Borussia Moenchengladbach climbed over Leverkusen into fourth with a goalless draw at second-from-bottom Werder Bremen, who are two points from safety.

Eintracht Frankfurt took a point at home in a 3-3 draw with Freiburg thanks to late goals by Timothy Chandler and Japan striker Daichi Kamada.

Third-placed RB Leipzig can draw level on points with Dortmund if they win on Wednesday at home to Hertha Berlin, who have won both games so far under new head coach Bruno Labbadia. Leipzig will be without Danish striker Yussuf Poulsen, who is set to miss the rest of the season with injury.—AFP

Tendulkar looms over India prodigy Prithvi Shaw

NEW DELHI: Comparisons to India's "god of cricket" Sachin Tendulkar have not always helped Prithvi Shaw as he seeks to put a doping ban and injury worries behind him and cement his place in the national side. Shaw, now 20, was instantly linked with Tendulkar when he matched the feat of the 'Little Master' by scoring centuries for Mumbai on his debuts in the domestic Ranchi and Duleep tournaments in 2017.

He then led India to victory at the Under-19 World Cup, and burst into the Test team in 2018 with a match-winning 134 against West Indies, becoming the youngest Indian to score a century on debut at

18 years, 10 months and 25 days.

But since then, the boyish batsman has followed a rocky path. An ankle injury ruled him out of India's historic first Test series triumph in Australia last year, and he was then slapped with a back-dated eight-month ban for taking a prohibited anti-asthma drug.

"He is a special talent and I am a little disappointed with the way things have taken its course after his ankle injury and then his ban for using the banned substance," former Test opener Wasim Jaffer told AFP. "Seeing all this troubles me, because he is very, very talented. But he needs to be disciplined if he wants to achieve great things."

"He is living in that Indian circle where he has got role models like Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, Shikhar Dhawan who are so disciplined."

Jaffer, who played 31 Tests for India, added: "There is much competition and he missed so many Tests and internationals and does not need to do that because this is his time to fulfil his potential."

Shaw, who has played four Tests and three ODIs, made headlines around the world as a 14-year-old

when he smashed a record 546 off 330 balls in a 2013 school competition.

That evoked memories of Tendulkar's 326 not out in his 664-run partnership with Vinod Kambli in the same tournament, the Harris Shield, in 1988. Comparisons have been made ever since.

Shaw has admitted there is a downside to being constantly likened to Tendulkar, a hero among cricket fans who holds the record for runs in Tests and one-day internationals.

"There is pressure when people compare me to him. But I take it as a challenge. I try to play like him. He is the god of cricket," Shaw told an online discussion with the Delhi Capitals, his Indian Premier League franchise.

Jaffer said Shaw has to be mentally equipped to deal with the pressures, like any international star. "Whenever you perform at the top level, the media and the people hype you so much, but it is an individual's responsibility to learn," said Jaffer.

"Virat keeps himself grounded. Every rising batsman in Mumbai circles is right away compared to

Tendulkar. Everything boils down to performance."

Shaw, who was only eight when he first met Tendulkar, said he regards the batting legend as a mentor and sometimes speaks to him about the mental challenges of the game.

"Now also whenever I go for practice, if Sachin Sir is there to watch me, he will talk, not much technically but mentally more," Shaw said, during a live chat on Instagram.

Veteran commentator Charu Sharma believes Shaw has lived up to the intense hype. "Because when you play school cricket or local league cricket, the leap from there to international cricket is a Grand Canyon. He has taken that leap and has landed on the right side because of all the early work he did," Sharma told AFP.

"Prithvi, like Rohit Sharma and Tendulkar, can adjust very well despite his aggressive stance and can assess the ball quicker than many other cricketers."

He added: "If he keeps himself physically well, mentally he is a very strong kid, he will be able to play for India for a very long time". —AFP

“It was brutally important”